2
Gakuto Mikumo
ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako
STRIKE THE BLOOD
FROM THE WARLORD'S EMPIRE

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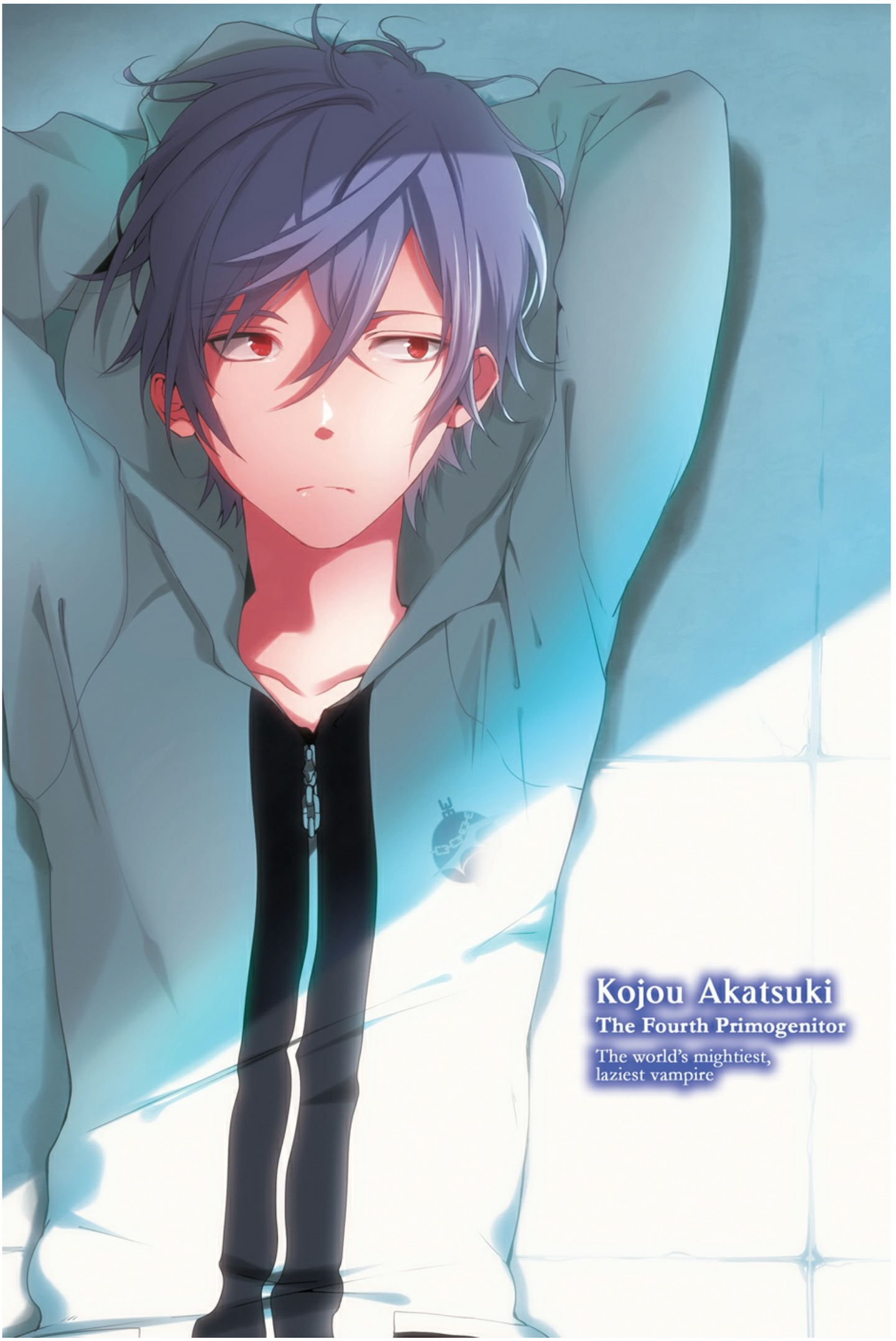
Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest,
laziest vampire

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

Sayaka Kirasaka
Shamanic War Dancer
Elegant dancer loaded out
with magic bullets

Dimitrie Vattler
Duke of Ardeal
Frivolous noble and
Master of Serpents

Astarte
Homunculus
Pure, doll-like host
of a Beast Vassal
Natsuki Minamiya
Witch of the Void
Vainglorious,
noble teacher

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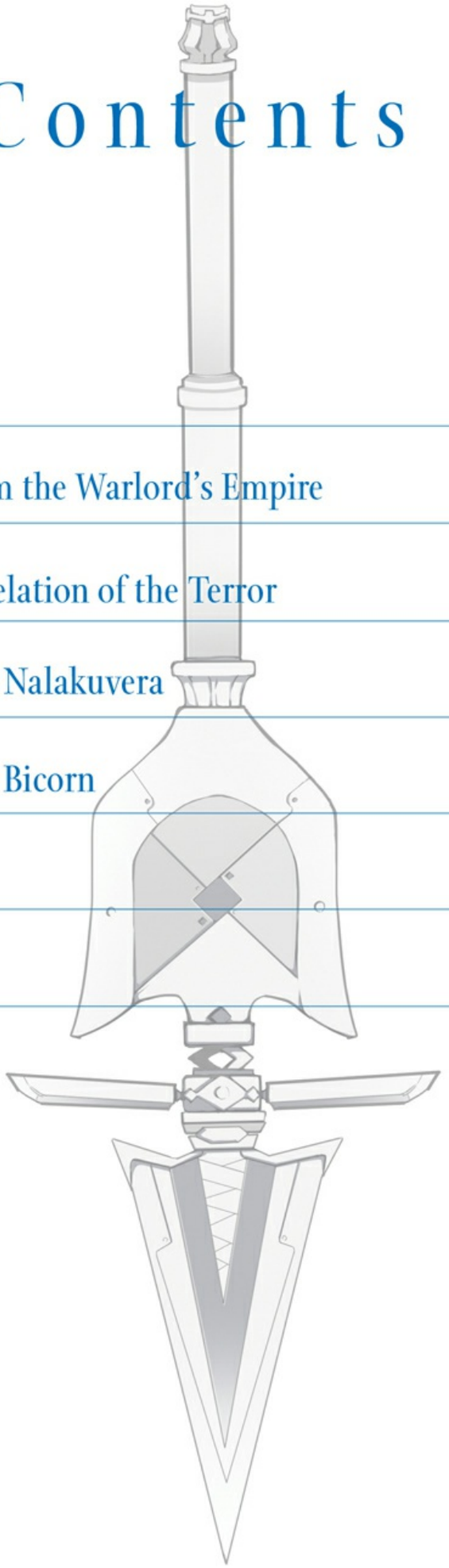


Design / Hirokazu Watanabe (2725, Inc.)

STRIKE THE BLOOD

FROM THE WARLORD'S EMPIRE

2

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Intro

INTRO

September 21. A night of a crescent moon…

It was the dead of night when the Island Guard assault team raided an old warehouse in the harbor district. They'd received information that a criminal organization was selling smuggled weapons on the black market.

Blowing the warehouse door away with explosives, the body-armored squad members charged straight in.

The iron columns were rusted, and wooden crates were piled atop one another. The men in the warehouse, under the dim lighting of mercury lamps, stood up all at once. They seemed to have been playing cards, but then a tossed flash-bang grenade detonated at their feet. The men, robbed of their vision, were then mowed down by submachine gunfire.

The assault team used consecrated electrum chip rounds. This was a special anti-beast-man ammunition that suppressed the regenerative abilities of demonic flesh. Destroying the rear wall of the warehouse, the second squad of the assault team charged in, as snipers hidden in the surrounding buildings shot suspects who tried to flee out of the windows.

Combat was over in less than two minutes. Faced with two fully outfitted Island Guard squads, which had the element of surprise, the suspects were completely overwhelmed. As the cloud of tear gas in the warehouse cleared, the men were on the floor in a heap.

There were seven of them. All were demons—demons without ID bracelets, who had entered the island illegally.

Bullet ridden and bathed in blood, they'd collapsed onto the floor.

This level of damage was not enough to actually kill the extremely hardy beast men, but it was enough to prevent bestialization and put them out of the fight.

One of the squad leaders ordered his men to put all the beast men in restraints.

But at that same moment, he suddenly remembered what they'd been told at the briefing. There were *eight* suspects hiding out in the warehouse. There had to be one more somewhere.

…Not good!

As the squad leader instantly brought his gun back up, one of the fallen beast men's bodies was hurled away with great force. Under it, a largely unharmed demon emerged. It was a black-furred, leopard-faced beast man with a huge, supple frame. He'd apparently used his own comrade as a shield to protect himself and conceal his presence.

Within one of the fully bestialized demon's hands was a small device that looked like a remote control.

The squad leader sucked in his breath as he realized that the frighteningly simple device was the detonation switch for a bomb set inside the warehouse.

"Fall back!" yelled the squad leader. But his voice disappeared amid the roar that erupted.

The shock wave pulverized the wooden crates piled high, a whirlwind of burning air scorching the interior of the warehouse in an instant. The flames dyed the night sky red—

†

"Shit, shit, shit, shit…you've done it now, human scum!"

The leopard-headed man's husky voice hurled a torrent of insults as he ran through the city in the middle of the night.

The bullet wound he'd sustained throbbed painfully. The pain in his eyes and nose was no doubt the effects of tear gas. The attack by a ritual energy-infused weapon had blocked his beast-man regenerative ability, too, which greatly prolonged his agony.

However, that was not all that had raised his hackles.

Though it was good he'd escaped the warehouse as it exploded, he'd lost his

comrades, and the weapons deal was a wash. It wasn't enough of a setback to hinder the plan, but it was a failure nonetheless. At this rate, he'd lose influence inside the organization. He might even lose the lieutenant colonel's trust.

"I'll never forgive them… They *will* pay for this."

The man shot a hate-filled glare at the warehouse behind him, still enveloped by flames. Then he turned his eyes toward the moonlit nocturnal skyline of the city.

Tokyo metropolitan area, Itogami City—a giant artificial island floating on top of the Pacific Ocean; established under the Holy Ground Treaty as an ideal of coexistence between humans and demonkind; an abominable "Demon Sanctuary."

The leopard-headed man was a native of the "Warlord's Empire" in Europe. He had no particular grudge against the humans of Itogami City.

Nonetheless, he had reason to destroy this city. By destroying a Demon Sanctuary, the Black Death Emperor Front he was part of would broadcast to the world it was in robust health, which would surely light the beacon of rebellion toward the usurper king who held demons back from their rightful place.

The plan was already in motion. This city's destiny could no longer be altered by anything those Island Guard lowlifes could do.

It might play minor havoc with their schedule, but drawing their attention onto himself was, if anything, a good thing. By serving as a decoy and throwing the Island Guard into chaos, the plan's chances of success would only grow stronger. Perhaps that, too, had been part of the lieutenant colonel's plan.

At any rate, he'd get his chance to avenge his comrades against the Island Guard soon enough. Even setting off a single bomb in the shopping district would tie them into knots.

He cared nothing for how many city residents might be caught in the explosion. All this interruption did was slightly alter the order in which they'd die. Yes, this city was destined to perish either way.

Maintaining his bestialized form, he leaped onto the top of a five-story building in a single bound. Even among so-called L-type beast men, the were-panther

species boasted especially great nimbleness and agility. Surely there was no one capable of following him as he ran through an urban area at night.

For now, it was best to find somewhere to hide and wait for his wound to heal…

But before that, the man's thumb moved toward the trigger for the remote detonator.

He'd set *two* bombs before their assault. He'd already used the first on the warehouse, but that left the other one he'd set in a corridor under the harbor district.

The Island Guard's reinforcements, called in to aid the wounded, should have been passing through right around that moment. Use the first blast to draw in the enemy's comrades; use the second to wipe them out. It was a time-honored tactic on the battlefield.

"Know my vengeance for my brethren…!"

The man strongly gripped the remote control in his hand.

But though his thumb should surely have touched the switch, it registered no sensation whatsoever.

With a sharp sense of unease, the man looked at his own right hand. He sucked in his breath in shock.

The remote control he should have been holding in his hand had vanished without a trace.

Instead, there was a chain wrapped around his arm. The silver chain, stretching out of thin air, bound his wrist like a handcuff.

"The hell…is this?!"

The leopard-headed man put strength into his arm to tear it from the chain. However, even the arm strength of a beast man could not pull the silver chain apart. On the contrary, the pull of the chain was keeping the man pinned there.

The next moment, he heard an articulate voice from behind him that somehow seemed to be mocking him.

“…Though incomplete, that’s Laeding forged by the gods. You lack the power to break it.”

“What?!”

With a low growl, the man turned to face the unexpected voice.

It was a small woman who looked like a child. She wore a ridiculously extravagant dress, holding a parasol in spite of it being the middle of the night. Her cherubic features gave her the look of a lovely doll. For no reason other than her looking so very out of place, the man knew fear.

“Really, using an unencrypted remote detonator over analog radio in this day and age? How cheap of you. You’re lucky to have gone so long without blowing yourself up.”

The woman murmured in apparent ridicule as the palm of her hand tossed around a small device that looked very much like a remote control.

The man’s face twitched as he beheld the sight. The device the parasol woman was toying with was the remote control for the detonator that should have been in his hand. He didn’t know what trick the woman had used to get close enough to snatch the detonator trigger away without him, a beast man, ever sensing it.

“A Counter-Demon Attack Mage, huh? How’d you catch up to me?”

The leopard-headed man’s amber eyes narrowed and glared at the woman. The woman’s lips suppressed a laugh.

“Did you really think you could shake *me* off? Highly conceited for a stray cat like you.”

“…Don’t get carried away with yourself, little girl!”

The leopard-headed man raised his voice at the sight of the woman’s mocking smile. He pulled a knife out of the belt around his waist and struck his right arm with it. By severing his wrist along with the chain that bound it, his body would be free to move once more. “My,” the parasol-wielding woman said in apparent admiration.

“Hmph, for a stray cat, I have to admire your guts. One of Kristof Gardos’s men, I presume? With the Black Death Emperor Front on its last legs, you sure

went through a lot of trouble, crossing the sea to get here."

"…I'll kill you!" The man howled as fresh blood scattered about from his right arm.

Even for beast men, who possessed great healing ability, regenerating a completely severed arm was no easy feat. However, even at that cost, he needed to defeat this woman of unknown origins here and now. For the success of their plan, someone who knew the name of Kristof Gardos—the lieutenant colonel—could not be suffered to live.

Tearing his own wrist from his arm, the man used the explosive speed characteristic of beast men to charge the parasol-bearing woman.

He needed not to rely on the knife any longer. The brute strength of a beast man was great even among demons, more than enough to tear a powerless human woman apart with his bare hand.

However, that parasol woman of unknown origin made a graceful smile.

"Futile. For you, at least…"

The claws extending from the man's fingertips touched her slender shoulder… or so he thought. That instant, the woman's form melted into a beautiful ripple, like the surface of a pool, leaving only thin air behind.

"The hell…?!" As an expression of shock came over him, the leopard-headed man looked back.

The woman, still elegantly holding up her parasol, had moved some ten meters away onto the rooftop of the next building over.

There had been no sound, no sensation; not a single hair on her head had even moved. It had happened instantaneously.

He felt like he was watching a desert mirage, but the woman's existence was certainly no illusion.

Her heart beat. She breathed. Her body was warm. She had a scent. All of his beast-man senses, hundreds of times more sensitive than a normal person's, told him the woman truly existed. She was, without doubt, a normal human being in possession of a physical form.

“I told you, you cannot kill me…” With a teasing smile, the woman with the parasol snapped her fingers.

A large ripple spread throughout the thin air around the man. By the time he realized that what looked like a ripple was actually a high-density magic circle, it was too late. A great number of silver chains emerged from the void, assailing the man as if they were sentient snakes, arresting his entire body.

“Spatial control magic…?! That’s crazy! That’s a trick only the highest-ranking practitioners of magic can pull off! How can a little girl like you…?!” The voice of the fallen man, his entire body restrained by chains, trembled in astonishment.

But the woman said not a word, tapping her parasol with a disinterested sigh. Looking up at the side of her face illuminated by the moonlight, the leopard-headed man made a low moan.

“I get it now…you’re Natsuki Minamiya! What are you doing here?! Don’t you have enough demon blood on your hands, *Witch of the Void*…!”

“My, my…the stray cat certainly can talk.” The woman with the parasol made her statement coldly. With a light wave of her hand, the supposedly severed hand of the were-panther appeared from the void, connecting to his arm as if forcing the two to mend themselves together.

“What are you doing?” asked the man, glaring up at Natsuki.

Natsuki expressionlessly looked back down at him. “Do not be concerned. I am not healing you out of kindness. It’s just a little first aid to stop the bleeding. After all, it would be inconvenient for you to die before we’ve dragged the information we need out of you.”

“…Do you really think I’ll give you information on my comrades?”

“I don’t think the likes of Kristof Gardos told you his real plan in the first place.”

“What do you mean…?”

Natsuki turned her back without giving the shaken man a reply.

“I’ll leave interrogating you about what terrorists from the Warlord’s Empire intend to do in a Demon Sanctuary in the Far East to the Island Guard’s people. I

may not look it, but I am quite busy. I have to prepare for classes tomorrow."

"Prepare for classes…?"

Natsuki's extremely out-of-place words threw the were-panther for a loop.

No doubt he couldn't comprehend that the woman, whose alias "the Witch of the Void" made the demons of Europe tremble, was a high school English teacher by day.

Natsuki vanished, leaving a gentle ripple in space behind her. After, the fallen, chain-bound beast man was left behind, all alone.

In spite of the string of curses falling from his lips, the man made a low laugh.

No, this changed nothing. Even his being captured here did not change the situation whatsoever. The plan was already in motion. Even the might of the Witch of the Void would not alter this city's destiny. Either way, this place was destined to perish.

This night, too, the blissfully sleeping city bathed in the silent glow of moonlight.

Prior to dawn…

A ship was calmly at anchor over waters nearly 330 kilometers south of Tokyo.

The ship was christened the *Oceanus Grave*. It was about four hundred feet in overall length. In the vernacular, it was known as a megayacht.

It was a Western-style cruise ship. The ship, the size of its hull rivaling that of a military cruiser, was so beautifully decorated that even extravagant passenger liners could not hold a candle to it. It bore such majesty that it could be called, without irony, a floating palace.

But in the end, the *Oceanus Grave* was a frighteningly luxurious castle owned by and built for a single man.

Though this fact seemed most unrealistic, anyone would instantly accept it upon hearing the owner's name, for the *Oceanus Grave* was the private property of the Duke of Ardeal, Dimitrie Vattler—a noble of the Warlord's Empire.

The ship's owner was enjoying the moonlit view on the upper deck. Lying on his side on an extravagant sun lounger, he leisurely tilted a glass of cassis liqueur in his hand.

He was a handsome, blond, blue-eyed man. By external appearance, he was in his midtwenties perhaps.

However, he bore the title of noble. In other words, he was a vampire of the so-called Old Guard possessing extraordinary power. His expansive territory within the Warlord's Empire had a standing army of such vast military might that it rivaled the armies of the Western European alliance; he himself was a monster possessing enormous power, able to wipe out a large city in the blink of an eye.

A slender silhouette approached the side of that young aristocrat.

She was a youthful Japanese teenager. Her tall, gracefully curved body was paired with facial features that gave one a sense of floral elegance.

Her long hair was in a ponytail, dancing without a sound as the sea breeze blew it around.

She wore the school uniform of a well-known girls' academy from the Osaka region.

In her right hand, she carried a black instrument case of the sort that would contain an electronic keyboard.

"So you were over here, Your Excellency?" The long-haired girl stood still, speaking with reverent formality.

Coincidentally, the destination of the ship he was sailing with had just come into view. It was a solitary island floating on top of the ocean with open sea all around it. It was constructed of floating structures of extremely large size; a Gigafloat…

Built with the objective of controlling "dragon lines," it was now a city for the research of demonic life and abilities thereof. It was the Demon Sanctuary known as Itogami Island.

"So that is it, the bastard child of scrap metal and sorcery? Quite a contraption you've constructed out of odds and ends. This is why humans are so interesting."

The young man seemed to be murmuring to himself, his behavior not indicating whether he was praising or insulting.

The girl brushed off his words with a chilly smile and presented him with a single letter.

“I have brought the Japanese government’s letter of reply.”

“…Mm?” Acting like he was noticing the girl’s existence for the first time, the young aristocrat slowly turned toward her. With an affable smile on his face, he did not project the oppressive feeling characteristic of vampires and the mighty power concealed within them.

The girl accepted his somehow sardonic gaze head-on as she continued speaking casually.

It says…effective twelve o’clock a.m. today, Your Excellency’s visit to the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island has been approved. Hereafter, Your Excellency shall be treated as a special diplomatic envoy of the Warlord’s Empire pursuant to the Holy Ground Treaty.”

“That’s quite fine. A proper and expected conclusion, yes? Well, had they told me to make myself scarce I meant to let myself in regardless, but that would have been a nuisance.” Still lying on the sun lounger, Dimitrie Vattler gave an innocent laugh.

But the girl’s expression hardened, as if reproaching him. “There is one condition.”

“Really. What is it?”

“The Japanese government insists that you accept it dispatching a watcher and that you heed the watcher’s counsel.”

“So, an overseer, then? I see,” said Vattler with an interested-seeming nod. “So, who is to be this watcher?”

“If I may be so forward, I would ask that you permit me to perform this duty.”

The girl’s reply was in a calm tone of voice backed up by a defiant look on her face.

Though called a *watcher*, her duty was more than merely playing tour guide.

She was essentially declaring, should the Japanese government see Vattler's existence as a threat, as a last resort, she would eliminate him. She was saying, in other words, that she possessed enough power to destroy even a vampire of the Old Guard.

Vattler gave the girl a mysterious look back as he asked her, "Ahh, I see. Incidentally, who are you?"

The girl let out a faint sigh at the young aristocrat's articulate, apathy-drenched words.

"I am called Sayaka Kirasaka. I have been granted the title of Shamanic War Dancer by the Lion King Agency."

"Lion King Agency, hmm. I think I recall hearing the name…," Vattler murmured with no sense of tension whatsoever. The girl shook her head, as if beside herself with irritation.

"A Japanese government special agency charged with countering sorcerous terrorism."

"…Sorcerous terrorism?"

"Please be advised that, as Your Excellency's visit to Itogami City has placed you under the agency's jurisdiction, we have been charged with accompanying your visit."

"Hmm. Well, whatever works." The young aristocrat easily consented. Then, he squinted with a smiling face. "That said, it's quite clever of the Japanese government to send a pretty girl like you to keep an eye on me." As Vattler added, as if speaking to himself, "Though I'd have been quite fine with a pretty boy as well," Sayaka, of course, shot him a disagreeable look.

"About that, Your Excellency. Even so, I am a Counter-Demon Mage permitted to wield Heavy Demon-Purging Bow Type Six, Der Freischötz. Do not forget that I have been granted the right to decide to shoot and destroy you, Your Excellency."

Vattler unexpectedly raised a pleasant-sounding laugh at Sayaka's sour words, apparently meant to intimidate.

“Ha-ha-ha, excellent! Quite interesting, indeed. I like you. Yes, yes, call me Dima or Vattler, whatever you like. No more of ‘Your Excellency’ and other such formalities.”

“…Understood, Duke Ardeal.” Sayaka would bend her etiquette for no one. As Vattler made a pouty-looking wave, he sat up and looked at Sayaka. There was a hazy, crimson flicker in both of his eyes, like a shimmering sun. “So, what shall we do about my other request, I wonder?”

“Your other…request?”

Sayaka’s expression hardened at the chilly aura Vattler was putting out.

“Could you stop playing dumb already? You found him long ago and have him under surveillance even now, yes? *The World’s Mightiest Vampire*, I mean.”

“If you are speaking as to the Fourth Primogenitor, shall we say, I do not deny it.”

Vattler faintly bared his fangs as he laughed at Sayaka’s calm, businesslike behavior.

“I’d appreciate it if you introduced him to me. Though I do understand why you’d want to keep him under wraps.”

Though the young aristocrat’s smiling face was as affable as before, this time his entire body was giving off a powerful aura that resembled a tangible, physical pressure. It was as if a twisted, ferocious emotion had gained physical form. Had she been a normal human and not a Counter-Demon Attack Mage, she would have lost consciousness just from being in the same place as that powerful maliciousness.

However, Sayaka maintained a neutral expression as she calmly shook her head.

“No, we have no reason to protect him.”

As she spoke, she took out a single photograph. It was a photo of a male high school student in uniform. He looked like a completely average teenage male. Kojou Akatsuki. That was his name.

The watery horizon began to acquire a faint, white twinkle. It would be dawn

soon enough.

“After all, Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, is our enemy…”

As Sayaka murmured, she crushed the photograph of the boy in her hand.

The ship on which she and the young aristocrat were traveling slowly approached Itogami Island.

Chapter One
From the Warlord's Empire

CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE WARLORD'S EMPIRE

1

Wednesday, mid-September, 6:25 a.m.…

That morning, for once, Kojou Akatsuki awoke alone.

One could fairly call this a highly exceptional event. Though not a fact he could really divulge in public, Kojou Akatsuki was a vampire, and as a vampire, Kojou was doomed to be weak to sunlight. This held true even though he bore an extravagant title: the Fourth Primogenitor.

The rays of the morning sun cut particularly deeply. Though they could not burn him to a crisp, he had to contend with a variety of symptoms such as feelings of fatigue and ennui, sleepiness, and loss of appetite. It was the latter symptom that was really troublesome, but to the uninformed, these symptoms were indistinguishable from a normal human being lacking sufficient sleep from staying up all night. For this reason, Kojou was deemed by the world at large to be a no-good high school student who was just not a morning person.

As Kojou thought of such things, what he found truly regrettable was that his younger sister, Nagisa Akatsuki, was no exception. Thanks to this, every day his troublesome younger sister gave him long-winded lectures while slapping him awake; somewhere along the line it had become part of Kojou's daily routine.

However, this morning only, Kojou felt no sign of Nagisa having entered his room.

Instead, he heard her through the wall in bits and pieces as she spoke in a happy-sounding voice. He didn't think she would have a guest visiting at this

early hour. Kojou wondered if she was talking to someone on the phone as he set foot out of his room. Still half-asleep, he dragged his feet toward the washroom to put his sleep-disheveled hair in order.

When Kojou finished washing up and returned to the living room, he noticed that breakfast had already been set on top of the table. There were Nagisa's handmade bagel sandwiches and Italian salad for three. The menu was slightly more elaborate than usual. Seeing this, Kojou understood. Apparently their mother had returned home for once.

Due to their parents having divorced four years earlier, the Akatsuki household was currently composed of three people. But their mother, Mimori Akatsuki, was the head of research at one of the corporations on Itogami Island—a rather prestigious job—and most days she never made it back to the house. She'd be away for a week to ten days before showing up in the dead of night or the morning without any notice. She lived something like the life of an outlaw—or a stray cat.

So in a sense, Kojou had no choice but to believe that his mother had returned while he hadn't realized it and was now in Nagisa's room, in spite of having no direct evidence whatsoever. Indeed, this was an act of God.

"Nagisa. Sorry, I'm gonna eat breakfast first. If you're gonna have coffee, I'll make enough for you, too, when I mix…"

Speaking with a yawn mixed in with his voice, Kojou opened the door to his little sister's room.

Nagisa's voice, which had continued without a single pause until that very moment, suddenly broke off. She looked up at Kojou, eyes wide with a look of surprise.

Though she still looked a little childlike, she was a middle school student with a constantly cute look on her face. She wore her long hair high enough that where it stopped it gave her a short-cut look. She was holding a cheerleading uniform over her lap. Nagisa was a member of the middle school's cheerleading club.

And as Kojou had anticipated, there was one other person in the room with Nagisa.

However, as Kojou had not anticipated, this person was a girl, much younger than their mother.

And this girl, her back to Kojou, was wearing underwear—and nothing else.

“Wh…”

This wholly unanticipated sight threw Kojou into complete confusion. Perhaps his morning grogginess explained why he couldn’t wrap his head around what was going on.

The defenseless underwear-clad girl glanced awkwardly over her shoulder.

Kojou immediately sucked in his breath at the girl’s serene beauty. Her body was delicate, but this lent it no impression of fragility. Even with the faint traces of youthful curves, her body possessed perfect symmetry, with a graceful curve to her back. She looked supple and tenacious, like a beautiful wild beast.

Kojou’s eyes remained completely taken by her figure.

His voice was broken as he asked, “…Why is…Himeragi here?”

Yukina Himeragi. That was the girl’s name. She was in the third year of middle school, one year younger than Kojou. Only a half a month before, she had transferred to Saikai Academy, becoming Nagisa’s classmate.

And she also bore the bizarre title of Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.

She was the watcher dispatched by that organization to observe Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor. It was her mission to stay close to Kojou, and should she determine him to be a dangerous being…to eliminate him.

But that being as it may, it did not change the fact she was a very pretty girl.

“S-senpai…?!” Yukina mumbled in Kojou’s direction, finally grasping the situation.

“Hey,” replied Kojou, reflexively replying to the greeting like a complete idiot. Even so, his gaze did not shift away from her whatsoever.

Gazing upon Yukina’s bare flesh as he was, one might say this was quite natural.

Her white skin was like delicate glass. Her slender collarbone was like a work of

art. She had a lean build, but even so, the body lines of her chest were mysteriously soft. It was impossible for the eye not to be attracted to all of these things.

But these were not the only reasons Kojou's gaze did not leave her, for the instincts of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire, warned him of danger.

Perhaps one might say he felt like he was face-to-face with a carnivorous beast, and should he avert his eyes for even a single moment, he would be attacked without hesitation. Perhaps it was more accurate to say it was like two master martial artists facing each other, neither making a move, each denying the other any opening. A precarious balance had been established between the staring, unmoving Kojou and Yukina's silence. Even the slightest trigger would have surely broken that equilibrium in an instant.

And the one who created that trigger, sitting on the edge of the bed, was Nagisa.

"K-Kojou?! What are you doing—?!"

Nagisa rose up with a yelp. Her voice broke the spell shackling Kojou and Yukina.

Almost simultaneously, the flustered Kojou mumbled "um, um" as he backed up, while Yukina covered her breasts with both hands, turning without making a sound. Yukina's fluttering hair, her white nape, her exposed back, and the smallness of the area of her body actually covered by clothes all flashed before Kojou's eyes. The next moment, Yukina's high sock-wrapped heel slammed into the side of Kojou's face—

By the time Kojou realized he'd taken a spinning roundhouse kick, his body was in a splendid spin as he flew to the far side of the room. It was enough of an impact that a normal human's skull might well have been half smashed.

Eeeeeek! With a slight delay, he heard Yukina shriek. Kojou would have liked to comment about the roundhouse kick having come *before* the shriek, but of course he had no opportunity to do so at the moment. On the floor, facing up, unable to rise, Kojou pressed his right hand against his face. As blood gushed vividly from his nose, he made a weak murmur mixed with a sigh.

"…Gimme a break."

That was the beginning of Kojou Akatsuki's very long day.

2

“Um, senpai…your nosebleed…is it really all right now?”

Inside the monorail car used to commute to school, Yukina, dressed in her school uniform, looked up at Kojou as she inquired.

She had a black gig case for a bass guitar over her shoulder.

There wasn’t actually a musical instrument inside, but rather, the Lion King Agency’s secret weapon—a frighteningly powerful spirit spear granted to her for the purpose of eliminating vampire primogenitors. As Kojou watched Yukina—the watcher for Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor—walk with that dangerous object never escaping her grasp, his mood became progressively more sullen.

“More or less. Anyway, I’m the one at fault. Not that I intended to peek, mind you,” Kojou apologized while rubbing his still-itchy nose.

The regenerative power of a vampire had healed the nasal bones broken by Yukina’s kick, but the nosebleed itself took a while to stop. But thanks to that, he had not been assailed by any vampiric urges—perhaps he should have been grateful for it.

“It’s all right… I’m not upset about it anymore.”

With a sigh in her voice, Yukina added, “And I did kick you full force.” Though her tone seemed to have resignation and embarrassment mixed in with it, she certainly gave off no hint of anger. A relieved expression came over Kojou’s face.

“Th-that’s good.”

“Er, well…I knew from the start that you were a pervert, senpai, so it is my fault for letting my guard down.”

“Eh?”

“I should have not forgotten the possibility such *accidental* behavior might arise from you, senpai.”

“Why are you acting like it’s a given I’d peek?! That really was an accident, you know. I mean, I’m sorry about the mistake, but still!”

“Hee-hee.” Yukina made a small laugh as she watched the flustered Kojou try to object.

Apparently she really was minded to forgive him. As Yukina suggested that “Yes, some soul-searching would be good” with a demure, admonishing look on her face, Kojou’s lips twisted a bit as he exhaled and patted his chest in relief. However…

“That’s no good, Yukina. If you forgive this pervert so easily…!”

It was Nagisa who broke the reconciliatory mood, inserting herself as if to shield Yukina.

Wearing the same uniform as Yukina, she looked up at Kojou with anger apparent in her eyes.

Spread out beyond the monorail’s windows was a cloudless blue sky with an ultramarine sea. As the rays of the morning sun mercilessly illuminated the inside of the car, Nagisa’s shrill voice reverberated in spite of the restrained volume.

“I can’t believe it. There’s just no way. And how do you call barging into a girl’s room without knocking an *accident*? Kojou, you’re the worst. I told you yesterday before bed that Yukina was coming over to visit the next morning, didn’t I?”

“Ah…now that you mention it, I do sorta feel like you might’ve told me that…” Kojou’s face grimaced as he arrived at a rather vague memory. “But I didn’t hear anything about Himeragi changing clothes at our place. What were you two doing at that hour?”

“Just stop with the weird imagination already, geez! We were taking measurements for adjusting outfits for the sports festival.” Nagisa added with a crude snort, “I told you about that yesterday.” But even being told this, Kojou didn’t have any grasp of the circumstances whatsoever.

“…What do you mean, outfits for the sports festival? It’s all just gym jerseys, isn’t it?”

“No. These aren’t for matches, they’re cheerleading outfits. We can’t use the cheerleading club uniforms to cheer on our own class, now can we? So we have to make new ones. The home economics club girls are doing the detail work, and

the boys are putting up the money for it."

Nagisa babbled on, explaining details he'd never asked about. The sheer quantity of words that came out of Nagisa's mouth was one of her few flaws, but at times like these he was grateful that she was a quick talker.

"Cheerleading uniforms…wait, Himeragi's wearing one, too?"

Kojou raised his eyebrows doubtfully as he asked Yukina, who had a sullen look for some reason.

Though the sports festival was an official school event, there was no rule that said girls had to dress up to cheer people on. He could understand Nagisa, an active member of the cheerleading club, running off to any cheer event, but he felt it was a bit unexpected for Yukina to volunteer to participate in an event like this.

A gloomy expression came over Yukina's graceful features as she spoke.

"I had intended to do no such thing, but I wasn't able to refuse…"

She heaved a sigh, exhaling her anguish. "No, you couldn't," Nagisa said, her cheerful voice the complete opposite.

"All of the boys in our class put their heads to the floor and begged Yukina. If the Princess cheered them on in a cheerleading outfit, they'd do anything for her as her loyal servants and work their rear ends off to win for her."

"All the boys bowed down?"

Kojou was taken aback by Nagisa's explanation. Yukina covered her eyes with an even more awkward expression. So "Princess" was Yukina's nickname, was it? *Not bad, brats,* Kojou thought with a smidgen of admiration. Apparently, without Kojou knowing it, Yukina had risen to the rank of class princess. He could imagine how awkward Yukina must have looked with a mob of classmates bowing down before her.

"Ordinarily I would've just blown them all off, but I can understand why the boys would say that. I mean, this is Yukina here, so I said, 'Hey, girls, let's work together on this.'"

For some reason Nagisa was awfully proud of it. Kojou finally had a decent

grasp on the circumstances. “So you’re both gonna cheerlead together, then.”

“Tee-hee, nothing wrong with that. Ah, Kojou, maybe you wanted us to cheer you on?”

Kojou gave an indifferent reply and shook his head. “Nah, it’s all the same to me really.”

Nagisa’s expression, which tended to move around a lot, changed to an obvious frown for once. “Huh? Why not?! Doesn’t it make you happy?!”

“I’d get embarrassed to have my little sister cheering me on, all worked up over just an intramural sports tournament.” Kojou let his comment loose with a very blunt tone. He’d only meant to convey the opinion that he had no interest taking pleasure in making his own little sister play cheerleader, but Yukina, listening from the side, seemed to derive a different meaning from it.

“E-embarrassing…outfit…” Mumbling as if in shock, Yukina hung her head in dejection. To such an overly serious girl, wearing a cheerleader outfit must have been a high hurdle indeed.

“Er, no. I’m not saying I’d be embarrassed to have you cheer me on, Himeragi.”

“Hah? What’s this? Yukina’s fine, but it’s embarrassing if *I* cheer you on?!”

“It ain’t that. I’m just sayin’, an intramural sports tournament’s just for fun, so you wouldn’t need to go out of your way to come see me at a match,” Kojou explained while waving his hand, looking annoyed at the bother.

Nagisa looked up at his face for a while with her lips in a pout. And as her expression suddenly went stiff, she inquired in a vaguely concerned tone. “… Kojou, does it still bother you? I mean…about last year’s tournament.”

“Tournament?”

For a moment, Kojou seriously didn’t know what she was talking about, looking back into his little sister’s eyes as he replied. Noticing that, as rarely happened, she seemed hesitant to say something, he finally understood the meaning of her question.

Back when Kojou had been part of the middle school basketball team, he had the youthful experience of being isolated on a team that was obsessed with

victory. It had thoroughly depressed him and was the trigger for him having quit basketball.

Watching Kojou while speaking of her coming to cheer him on must have made Nagisa remember all that.

“Ahh, nah. Has nothin’ to do with that at all.”

“Really?”

“Not one little thing to do with me. And it’s not like I hate basketball or anything.”

As Kojou said it, he shrugged his shoulders as if concealing embarrassment.

It was true that he didn’t pay any heed to the past. Kojou wasn’t the only one to have quit his club when graduating to high school, after all; it held no special meaning. The guys from the basketball club at the time were striving to do well even now.

Regardless, in his current state, Kojou couldn’t seriously immerse himself into sports. Kojou was, after all, the World’s Mightiest Vampire. He couldn’t be using the extraordinary physical and demonic abilities possessed by a “primogenitor” in the middle of ordinary high school varsity sports.

But Nagisa, who didn’t know of those circumstances, smiled happily as she listened to Kojou’s words.

“Is that so? So, maybe we can still see your match at this sports festival, then?”

“Not necessarily gonna be in a match like you’re hopin’ for, though.”

Kojou felt a faint throbbing feeling as he tossed the comment out.

In the sports festival, high school boys had three events: basketball, table tennis, and badminton. It had not yet been decided that Kojou had any role to play.

In the first place, they’d probably prioritize people with experience for the competition, so there was a high chance Kojou would be assigned to the basketball court. *Maybe that’s okay,* thought Kojou.

Though he missed being able to have serious fun in intense team competition like he used to, if he thought of it as giving his worried little sister a freebie, playing while holding back quite a bit wasn't so bad at all.

"Can't be helped. Well, if you do get an event we definitely have to cheer you on. Right, Yukina?"

Nodding, in a good mood for some reason, Nagisa sought Yukina's agreement.

For a moment, Yukina's eyes blinked in bewilderment. No doubt she never imagined she'd be made to cheer Kojou on, too.

To Yukina, who was worried about wearing a cheerleader outfit at all, it had to have been a very troublesome invitation. In the first place, Yukina had been dispatched as the Fourth Primogenitor's watcher; cheering Kojou on in a sports festival wasn't exactly part of her mission.

However, with Nagisa's radiant face turned toward her, it was no surprise she just couldn't say no.

"I suppose you're right…I'll cheer, too."

Lastly, Yukina made a sigh, as if conveying to Kojou her grudging surrender. Seeing the faint, strained smile on her face, Kojou made a pained smile of his own. A moment later, the monorail arrived at the station they were heading to.

As usual, the three of them got out of the car at the same time, trading the usual formalities.

It was a common, everyday scene…

Kojou had not yet noticed, but in Itogami Harbor, visible from the monorail car's windows, was moored a single, unfamiliar, highly extravagant ship.

3

Kojou parted ways with Yukina and Nagisa right about when they arrived at the school gates. Yukina and Nagisa turned toward the middle school campus a short distance away while Kojou went straight ahead to the high school building.

Itogami Island was the Island of Everlasting Summer, floating in the middle of

the Pacific Ocean.

Even halfway into September, there was not even the smallest subatomic hint of autumn whatsoever; the merciless morning rays of the midsummer sun poured down upon the school grounds.

As Kojou ran into the entrance, feeling much like a slime mold frantically trying to escape ultraviolet light, the preceding visitor was right before him. A schoolgirl was changing her shoes in front of the shoe lockers for Kojou's class.

She had a showy hairstyle and refined perfume. With good fashion sense, she wore her school uniform in just the right ways to stand out from her classmates.

"Good morning, Kojou. To think, you arrived on time for once."

She spoke to him in an easygoing tone like she was one of the boys. Though her shapely lips were curled into a grin, it was a mysteriously affable and memorable expression. She took a large sports bag placed right by her loafers and tossed it toward him.

"What's all this stuff, Asagi?" Kojou asked casually as he retrieved his own footwear.

As Kojou did so, Aiba Asagi grinned broadly as she looked up at him.

"Sorry, you just happened to arrive at the perfect time. It's heavier than I expected and a real pain."

"I haven't said one word about carrying it for you."

"Oh, you're a big help. If you could just put it in front of the locker…"

Ignoring Kojou's meager protests, Asagi issued one-sided commands. Kojou, giving up on any further resistance, reluctantly picked up the bag. Through the gap left by the partially open zipper, he saw a number of old rackets and white birdies—shuttlecocks for badminton.

"A badminton racket? What's this for?"

"It's for the sports festival practice. I called in a favor and my older sis lent it to me. The school doesn't have enough equipment, see."

"Huh," murmured Kojou in apparent admiration. "You do sensible things

sometimes.”

“You didn’t have to say ‘sometimes.’ After all, I’m also known as ‘Asagi, the Highly Considerate Beautiful High School Girl.”

“A highly considerate beautiful high school girl wouldn’t say that about *herself*.”

“Oh shut up. Well, actually Rin asked me to do this just yesterday.”

Asagi made her unapologetic admission while they headed up the stairs to class.

“So, what are you going to be in, Kojou?”

“Who knows… I asked Tsukishima to make it as fun an event as possible, though,” Kojou replied in an unenthusiastic tone. Once the class representative, Rin Tsukishima, heard everyone say what sports festival event they wanted to participate in, she’d assign people using her own independent judgment. She took a hard-line stance: If you had a problem with your assigned event, you were on your own when it came to negotiating a trade.

“Geez,” said Asagi, exhaling, seeming somehow dejected.

“Give it up already. Former hot-blooded, annoying jocks are only worth anything at sports festivals like this, so put some more energy into it, Kojou the Irritating.”

“Who’s Kojou the Irritating?! Careful what you say. Hey, you should apologize to all the former athletic club members in the country—”

Reaching the top of the stairs, shooting the breeze in their usual fashion, Kojou and Asagi went into the classroom.

A moment later, the atmosphere picked right up.

About 70 percent of the students were already in the classroom. Every last one of them turned and looked at Kojou.

“Wh-what?”

“Don’t ask me. I just got here, same as you.”

There was an eerie mixture of consent and trust floating in the classroom’s air.

It was not a frigid feeling. Indeed, it was a strange feeling of anticipation.

Responding to the puzzling behavior, Kojou and Asagi stood in place, feeling rather awkward.

“Heya, Kojou. Showin’ up carryin’ your partner’s equipment like this, man, you’re really into this.”

One student near the teacher’s desk called out to them in a very good mood. The boy, his short, spiky hair combed back and giving off a frivolous air, was Motoki Yaze. He was both Kojou’s bad friend from middle school and Asagi’s childhood friend.

Kojou and Asaki glared with apparent displeasure at the friend who knew them so well.

“Partner?”

“…What are you talking about? Did getting dumped by your older girlfriend scramble your brain?”

“I’m not scrambled, dumped, or acting! There, there! You see?”

Speaking in an excited voice, Yaze pointed toward the blackboard standing behind him.

Rin Tsukishima was standing right there. She was a tall schoolgirl who gave off an adultlike air. She had written on the blackboard, with her characteristic attention to detail, the names of all of their classmates.

“I was just announcing who’d be participating in which sports festival events.”

“Right…”

Kojou and Asagi both tried to sound sensible as their faces met. They had no idea why this would draw attention to the two of them. Unable to settle down his nerves, Kojou looked over the curves of what was written on the blackboard in white chalk.

“Badminton mixed doubles? Me and Asagi, paired up?”

Kojou was in mild shock when he noticed their names in an unexpected place.

Of course, Kojou had no experience in badminton at all; he didn’t remember

asking to be in that event, either. He knew from the start that it was going to be mixed doubles. On top of that, all of the player pairs beside Kojou and Asagi were publicly acknowledged couples.

"…Why do I have to team up with Kojou?"

Asagi asked with a guarded expression on her face. However, Rin made a composed smile.

"It's a new rule for this year. Singles are scrapped, so there's room for more mixed doubles pairs. Ah, and actual badminton club girls aren't allowed."

"So why does it have to be me and Kojou?!"

"Asagi, you told me before that you liked him, didn't you?"

"E-excuse me?! Wh-wh-when did I say anything like that…?!"

"For badminton."

Rin spoke with her normal, serene voice. Asagi made a small sound and chose her words more carefully. "…I only practice with my older sister once in a while, so I'm not actually good or anything."

"If you understand the rules, that's plenty." Speaking in a very calm tone, Rin silenced Asagi. "Akatsuki said he didn't have any preference for events, so no complaints there, yes? I'd actually thought about having him play basketball, but sorry, I had no idea."

Watching Rin awkwardly cover her eyes, Kojou bounced a question back with a suspicious look on his face. "What do you mean?"

For some reason, Rin looked pitiably at Kojou as she shook her head. "There's no need to force yourself. I heard from Yaze about Akatsuki back in middle school."

"Eh?"

"That due to repeated perverted stalking incidents involving female basketball club members, you were ordered to stay clear of the basketball court, yes?"

"Huh?!" Rin's rather outlandish declaration made Kojou's mental circuits short out for a moment.

Certainly Kojou had some bad experiences related to basketball back in middle school, but he had no recollection of anything borderline criminal like that.

“The heck’s that?! What stalking are you talking about?”

“But don’t worry, it’s all right. Even if you are a twisted pervert addicted to the scent of girls’ basketball shoes and jerseys, our class will not forsake you, Akatsuki.”

“Now hold on…! Don’t believe garbage like that! That’s a fabrication any way you slice it!” Kojou shouted insistently, but without saying a word, his classmates only sent lukewarm gazes tinged with pity back at him. “So that’s how it is,” said Asagi, her eyes narrowed as she made a great sigh.

“I get it now. This is all *your* doing, isn’t it, Motoki?”

“Nice assist, right?”

As his childhood female friend glared at him, Yaze made what was, for whatever reason, his trademark thumbs-up. Apparently he was the mastermind behind pairing Kojou and Asagi together.

Kojou didn’t know what he was up to, but it was probably some rotten scheme of his.

“There you go sticking your nose where it’s not needed again…! And Rin’s in on it, huh?”

Asagi had a pouty expression on her face as she cross-examined the serene-faced class rep.

Rin made a rather mischievous smile as she spoke in the same cool tone as always. “You have permission to use the court. Have fun practicing today after classes.”

4

“Asagi? You’re still in the classroom?”

That day, after classes—

Asagi Aiba, having taken her eyes off Kojou Akatsuki for a short time only to

hear her name called out of the blue from a blind spot, froze for a moment. Suppressing the yelp that threatened to escape her lips, she turned around, maintaining her composure.

Unaware of Asagi's hard work, Kojou had his usual languid expression on his face.

Apparently, even though they'd been picked for a doubles pair, Kojou thought of it as just a sports festival team-up, with nothing special about it at all.

Though his indifferent expression threatened to turn her tension to spontaneous bloodlust, Asagi somehow limited herself to clearing her throat. She was self-aware enough to know she had no good cause for resentment.

Faced with Asagi's attitude of obvious displeasure, Kojou hesitated for a moment and raised an eyebrow.

"If we're gonna practice for this sports festival, we should get it out of the way as soon as we can."

"Ah… R-right. I'll change clothes, so go to the gym ahead of me, okay?" Asagi's smile twitched as she spoke.

Kojou meekly nodded. "Well, see you later. I'll borrow a racket."

"Ah, right, right."

Asagi saw off the departing Kojou with a wave before making a long sigh.

As she did so, she suddenly heard a voice.

"Hmmm."

It was the cool, composed adult voice of Rin Tsukishima. Rin, wearing blue gym clothing over her tall figure, had an expression that seemed pleased somehow as she watched and compared Kojou's leaving with Asagi's remaining seated.

"What?"

"Akatsuki left quite easily, didn't he? I would have thought he wouldn't have liked the trouble of practicing for the sports festival."

"When it comes down to it, he likes winning. He's a little boy that way."

Asagi made a large shrug of her shoulders as she spoke. Rin, for her part, tilted

her neck slightly with a serious look on her face.

“I wonder. Perhaps it’s the fact he’s paired with you that has him pumped up?”

“Now hold on a minute.” Asagi twisted her tongue in what seemed to be a pout as she glared at Rin. “Geez, would you and that idiot Motoki stop toying around with me and Kojou? Sticking your nose in and pushing this sports festival business onto me like this…”

“Is it a bother?” Rin asked with a laugh in her voice. Asagi made a sullen-sounding sigh.

“A big bother. In the first place, what’s with this outfit?” As she spoke, she pointed to the nylon bag on top of her lap. Packed inside the bag was a sports towel and gym clothes for practicing for the sports festival.

“What, you ask…? It’s a uniform for badminton, of course. I put it aside for you, but maybe the size isn’t quite right? Could it be that you’ve grown so much in certain places that you can’t wear it?” Rin asked with a tone of concern.

“I can wear it,” Asagi bluntly confessed without thinking. “Th-that doesn’t mean I should be wearing something this dramatic at just some little school event.”

It was a short, pleated skirt and a sturdy, short sleeveless polo shirt; Asagi pointed out the numerous places where the uniform would leave her seriously exposed. Perhaps not for a public tournament match, but she couldn’t help but be embarrassed to wear it at practice for a mere sports festival.

Yet Rin made a mischievous laugh regardless. “But Asagi, your legs are so pretty.”

“—Um, what?”

Asagi froze, unable to respond to the unexpected words from her friend, who usually was not one for jokes. However, Rin’s tone of voice remained perfectly composed.

“…Well, Yaze said that transfer student in middle school couldn’t lay a finger on you where they’re concerned.”

“Why did that Himeragi girl come up when talking about *that*…?” Asagi kept her voice low as she inquired. She meant to keep her composure, but the sudden shock put an unpleasant tone into her voice.

Yukina Himeragi, transfer student to the middle school. A girl so ridiculously pretty that Asagi couldn’t even dream of being jealous, and on top of that, she’d strangely hit it off with Kojou even before her transfer. Some of the students had apparently pegged her as Kojou’s girlfriend. Though not a fact Asagi wished to acknowledge, without a doubt, that girl was the cause of Asagi having been thrown off-pace of late.

“Although I believe you are well aware of the reason, even more than I am, Asagi…”

Rin’s expression did not change as she glanced toward the corner of the middle school building.

“She’s very cute. She’s Akatsuki’s little sister’s classmate, isn’t she?”

“S-seems so, yeah.”

Watching how Asagi was unable to hide her discomfort, Rin made a gentle smile.

“Though I went through all the trouble of preparing the uniform, I won’t force you to wear it. If you want to use your sweaty gym outfit from morning classes while you spend time with Akatsuki, by all means…”

“I-it’s not sweaty. I used deodorant and everything…,” Asagi protested in a weak voice.

Rin said nothing in reply, waving her hand and walking off. “Well, I’m heading to the table tennis room. Good luck, Asagi.”

As she headed out with the students who formed the table tennis team, Asagi was the only one left behind.

Looking down at the uniform spread over her desk, Asagi exhaled with irritation.

“Geez…why do I have to worry about things like this! Stupid Kojou!”

5

I don't really get all this, was how Kojou honestly felt. About Asagi, of course.

He could understand why she was annoyed that Yaze and Rin had schemed to force her and Kojou together as a pair. But in fact he hadn't sensed that Asagi was seriously angry at any point.

After having been in such a sour mood during the morning, by noon break she'd recovered and had been talking normally to Yaze and the others. In the first place, Kojou and Asagi's classmates teasing them about how nicely they got along had been a daily ritual since middle school. He didn't think it was anything Asagi would suddenly get worked up about now.

What he couldn't figure out was her attitude toward him.

Even when he tried talking to her, she seemed really stiff, yet she kept glancing at Kojou every so often; the whole thing was awkward. And yet her mood didn't seem to actually be bad.

He felt that he'd seen quite a bit of odd, uncharacteristic behavior from Asagi of late.

Kojou finally remembered something.

Asagi's attitude had gotten weird right around the end of summer break—

Right about when Kojou had met Yukina.

"—Er, Akatsuki? All by yourself? Where's Aiba?"

When Kojou arrived at the gym, his classmate Uchida saw him and called out to him. He was a pretty boy of small stature and delicate lines who was sometimes mistaken for a girl, even in his school uniform.

Standing close by Uchida's side was Yuuho Tanahara. She was a tall, willful girl, but in front of Uchida, she seemed like a different person, showing a much cuter side. She was the archetypal young maiden in love.

Both of them were in the middle of standing poles up on the gym floor for the badminton nets. Even though that was all they should be doing, for some reason, other people stood aside with a friendly disposition, as if not wanting to

butt in. At any rate, the atmosphere said not to approach the little world they had all to each other.

They weren't the only ones that gave off that thick couple scent; other pairs inside the gym were exactly the same. Pressing shoulder to shoulder as they practiced their serves, gazing into each other's eyes as the moment struck them —they probably didn't even realize what they were doing, but for the very single Kojou, it made watching them unusually uncomfortable.

This made Kojou decide on his own that it was natural Asagi would be angry.

"Asagi's apparently gonna take her time changing her clothes. Better start practice without us. I'll just take it easy."

"Guess we'll do just that. Sorry, pal."

Waving to the cheerfully replying Uchida, Kojou went outside the gym.

It was already past four in the afternoon. The sky had already begun its gradual shift toward sunset, but the afternoon sun was strong, and the humidity was murderous.

Kojou, walking along the connecting corridor searching for a place even slightly cool, sat down on the landing on top of the emergency stairs. He closed his eyes and laid down faceup.

Then…

"—Senpai?"

He heard a shocked-sounding voice coming from above his head.

The voice sounded familiar, so Kojou opened his eyelids a crack.

What filled his field of vision were slender legs clad in deep blue socks.

Kojou rose up with a start, meeting Yukina's eyes as she glared, her expression frigid. She'd apparently just come down the emergency stairs.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" Yukina asked while holding down the skirt of her school uniform. From the air she gave off, there was clearly some misunderstanding afoot.

Kojou quickly shook his head and pointed at his own gym uniform. "As you can

see, I'm…gettin' ready for badminton practice. Waiting for my partner to come over."

"Badminton…? Not basketball?" Yukina's eyes fluttered curiously as she asked. Then, her voice suddenly hardened. "By partner, do you mean a girl?"

"Yeah, but it's not like I asked to take part in a mixed doubles event."

Kojou, having the sense he was being scolded for some reason, made pains to defend himself.

"I do not particularly mind, but…"

As Yukina looked squarely at him, Kojou wanted to retort, *Did I do something I should feel guilty for?*

Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Kojou forced a change of subject.

"So, what are you doing over here, Himeragi? This is the high school campus."

"…Is that so? I'm sorry, senpai, do you know where the cheerleading clubroom is?"

"The high school cheerleading club's room?"

"Yes. Nagisa asked me to come over, but I got lost along the way."

Kojou thought the words coming out of Yukina's mouth were suspicious. Saikai Academy's cheerleading club was divided into the middle school club and the high school club; each had their own activities, so surely they didn't share the same clubroom.

"I know where it is, but what's she doing at the high school cheerleading club, anyway?"

"Fitting clothes. Apparently she wants to borrow tennis skirts, so…"

Yukina made a frail exhale as she spoke, her expression growing clouded. No doubt she just wasn't cut out for the whole cheerleading thing. Even so, it was just like the overly serious Yukina to go to be fitted as she was told.

"Guess I'll help her out a little," Kojou murmured to himself with a strained smile. "I'll lead the way. It's a bit complicated over there, so I'm not sure I could explain it well enough."

“Thank you very much. But, senpai, don’t you have practice?”

Kojou made a lighthearted nod in response to the look of concern that came over Yukina.

“It’s all right. Asagi’s not here yet, and I’ll be back in under five minutes I’m sure.”

“Aiba…is it? She’s your partner for doubles, senpai…?” Yukina, suddenly halting in place, asked in a grave voice.

For no apparent reason, Kojou felt nervous.

“Er, she is, but it’s not what you think. It’s not like I asked to be paired up with Asagi.”

He quickly voiced his excuse. Yukina’s unmoved eyes looked at Kojou as she made a sigh.

“It isn’t that I particularly mind.”

Hearing quite a bit of displeasure in her words, Kojou looked up at the sky and sighed.

6

It was on the way back after seeing Yukina to the cheerleading clubroom. Kojou Akatsuki was standing at a vending machine corner, holding a soda can he’d miraculously found in the pocket of his gym outfit.

“Shit…I feel totally wiped out…”

He poured the flavorless shaved ice into the paper cup he’d taken from the vending machine, drowning it in the colored cola. “Don’t give me that look,” Kojou scolded the unresisting vending machine, then sat on a bench, gazing lazily at the setting sun.

He figured Asagi should finally be done changing clothes and arriving at the gym right about then.

Though he wasn’t really thrilled at returning to that couple-filled lovey-dovey atmosphere, Kojou knew that leaving Asagi there by herself would only create

more trouble later. As he crunched down his ice, Kojou sluggishly rose to his feet, heading from the back of the gym to the entrance.

A moment later…

The bench that Kojou had sat on until just then suddenly swelled up and burst apart like a balloon.

“…Eh?”

Fragments of shattered wood grazed Kojou’s cheek as they flew. Even so, Kojou did not comprehend what had occurred.

The remnants of the blasted-apart bench fell to the ground in slow motion. Instinctively sensing danger, his vampire nerve cells kicked in. Though it was but a single moment, he felt like it was drawn out dozens of times over. In exchange, his eyes and skin were suddenly in pain, as if they were on fire. His now-acute senses were screaming from the sunrays pouring directly onto him.

But on the other hand, his painfully acute super senses alerted Kojou to new danger.

A silver beam flew toward Kojou’s feet as he remained frozen in place.

His body moved faster than he could think. He hit the ground hard, as if plunging headfirst, dodging the beam just in the nick of time. The beam was actually a metal arrow. Bearing the sharp tip and wings of a Western-style bow’s arrow, it plunged into the ground at Kojou’s feet.

“Th-the hell?!”

Unable to grasp that someone was targeting him, Kojou stared blankly at the arrow shaft buried into the ground.

The connecting corridor, the emergency stairs, the gym, the roof, the shadow of the commemorative tree: No matter how much he looked all around, he couldn’t narrow down where the shooter might be hiding. In this circumstance, not knowing who was targeting him or from where, Kojou began to fall into light panic. Then…

The arrow that had thrust into the ground suddenly lost its shape. Like a curtain that had lost its clasp, the metal became a thin sheet and spread out,

finally taking a new shape.

The metal sheet expanded, bent into acute angles, and changed into a complex, bestial form.

“D-dog?! No…a lion?!”

With false life breathed into it, the metal sheet roared like a beast as it trod upon the earth.

It moved with the bestiality of a real predator. Without doubt, this was a monster created by dark forces.

The moment Kojou moaned, “You’ve got to be kidding me,” the metal beast pounced.

Kojou hit the ground and rolled once more, evading the downward swipe of the beast’s front legs.

The steel-constructed beast’s legs made up for their lack of thickness by being as sharp and polished as knives. If he let those things touch him, he’d be sliced clean through the bone.

“Is it after me?! Why…?!” Kojou asked, his breathing ragged. Of course, the beast did not answer. The only sound its steel throat made was a low, menacing growl.

Then another beast appeared behind the agitated Kojou. It was indeed another metal beast that had appeared, a wolf kicking about the remnants of the bench. It had probably been the arrow that had first attacked him, altered into a new form.

“This is…bad…”

Kojou ground his teeth and groaned as the steel lion and wolf pinned him from the front and rear.

Even though these things were produced via ritual, the monsters’ agility was no different from that of real beasts. As their entire bodies were like blades, they might well have been more dangerous than the real thing.

Of course, if Kojou released his own Beast Vassal, he could vaporize monsters of this degree in an instant.

But if he did that, the Saikai Academy building wouldn't get off easy, either. If he wasn't careful, he might envelop all of the students, wiping the entire school out without a trace. Kojou's abilities as the World's Mightiest Vampire were too powerful to unleash against this grade of opponent.

That said, he had no chance of victory in physical combat. Under the burning sun, Kojou's physical abilities were at their nadir; next time, if both beasts attacked simultaneously, there would be no escape. If Kojou were to suffer mortal injury, the odds of Kojou's Beast Vassal going berserk were quite high indeed.

"What am I gonna do?!" Kojou asked himself. But before finding an answer, the two beasts leaped at once.

Knowing deep down he couldn't dodge them, Kojou sucked in his breath.

"—Senpai! Duck!" With truly last-second timing, a familiar girl's voice echoed.

Kojou bent down at once as a roaring wind seemed to pass overhead.

It was the silver spear—a long, all-metal polearm, its construction resembling a fighter plane with swept-back wings.

The spear seemed to fly like a gale-force wind as it pierced the steel-made lion attacking Kojou, shattering it.

"Himeragi?!"

The one who'd thrown the spear and saved Kojou from danger was a small-built middle school girl. It was Yukina, who he'd parted ways with just earlier at the clubroom. Resembling a beautiful beast as she sprinted over, she danced in the air with equal force, kicking away the steel-made wolf aiming at Kojou's back.

The wolf, its own flesh like a sharp blade, looked like a mere thin metal plate from the side. It was knocked away by Yukina's powerful spinning kick, crashing against the wall with a roar.

"'Snowdrift Wolf'—!"

Yukina withdrew the spear that was impaling the ground. With one fluid motion, the silver spear tip thrust into the steel wolf. This alone easily broke the

wolf into pieces. One could no longer call this combat. The scene looked like simple pest control.

Her combat ability was far in excess of the monsters that had backed Kojou into a corner. This was Yukina's true form, that of a so-called Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.

"Are you all right, senpai?" Yukina asked while poising her spear, looking around the area without letting her guard slip.

She was not wearing her usual school uniform, but rather, a cute cheerleading outfit with blue lines on a white background.

Kojou breathed out in exhaustion, his sense of tension thoroughly wrecked by the cute outfit.

The attacks by the unseen enemy seemed to have broken off. He hadn't intended to involve Yukina, or perhaps he'd judged she couldn't win. Either way, there was no mistaking that she'd saved him.

"Sorry, you really saved me there. But what are you doing here, Himeragi?"

Kojou brushed the dust from his body as he got up.

Yukina continued to grip the staff as her back stiffened.

"I'm sorry, senpai. The *shikigami* I had observing you came to inform me it detected offensive ritual energy, so I was concerned and came over…"

"Hah? Observe? What the heck's a *shikigami*?"

As Kojou asked sharply, Yukina averted her eyes as her shoulders quivered.

Watching from the side as Yukina hung her face, Kojou continued watching without a word when Yukina took pains to clear her throat and raise her face. She thrust her chest out in defiance as if saying, *It's nothing I should feel guilty about*.

"…It's my mission!"

"Wait a sec!! You mean you've been watching me the whole time?! Not just today?!"

"Please calm yourself. I do respect your privacy, senpai."

“How can I be calm about it?!”

Kojou scratched his head as he yelled. He’d let his guard down, thinking that lately she’d been more open, but she was indeed a nationally accredited stalker with an insanely overly serious personality.

Simply not knowing how that *shikigami* stuff worked and moved around made Kojou really wonder about just how much of his privacy she allowed him. He didn’t think she was watching him in the bath or using the toilet, though. Either way, no matter how pretty a girl she might be, Kojou was not inclined to be pleased at her peeking into his private life.

“More importantly, senpai, do you have any idea who is after you?” Yukina asked while clearing her throat once more.

Kojou grimaced and shook his head.

As Yukina was clearly asking that the observation incident be set aside until later, the question at hand was the existence of an enemy that had attacked Kojou.

“So I *was* the one they were after?”

“So it would seem…but rather than a spell targeting you, senpai, this is…”

Murmuring as if talking to herself, Yukina picked up one of the fragments of the steel beast she’d destroyed. It was a thin piece of cheap-looking metal. Kojou groaned in shock as he watched.

“…Tin cans? That’s what the monsters that attacked me really were?”

“These too are *shikigami*. Originally, they were meant to deliver messages to others across long distances rather than being used offensively like this, but…”

As Yukina muttered suspiciously to herself, she bent the metal fragment she’d picked up. She changed its shape to two triangles meeting together; it gently floated up into the air. She’d apparently meant it to act like a butterfly.

The wannabe butterfly, resembling something an elementary kid would scribble, fluttered for a while as it flew all around along the breeze, but finally its strength gave out and it fell back to the ground. Yukina made a small sigh as she looked it over.

“It would seem the caster has fled. I thought I could trace the ritual energy, but…”

“I see.” As Kojou wouldn’t have understood even if she’d explained the fine details, he nodded in her direction. The gist was, by his reckoning, that she’d tried to track whoever it was and failed. If even Yukina’s ritual arts couldn’t track them, there was no way Kojou could chase them down.

Looking over the destroyed bench, Kojou shrugged—it wasn’t like it was his fault—and Yukina made a seemingly dejected sigh as well. Yukina’s expression suddenly went pale.

She was looking at a bicycle rack behind the gym. Two schoolgirls passing by on their way home from school were pointing across a fence toward Kojou and Yukina, talking about something.

“…Himeragi?”

“I’m sorry, senpai. They have seen Snowdrift Wolf. I have to capture them and erase their memories immediately—”

“W-wait up, Himeragi!”

Kojou quickly moved to stop Yukina, who was gripping her spear and seemed ready to fly off.

“You don’t have to do that! Seriously, you don’t need to worry!”

“How can you just dismiss it like that?!” Yukina looked back with an expression that had no room for doubt. For Yukina, an exceptional, overserious student who was ideal for dealing with trouble when it arose, this was her greatest weakness. Kojou tried to ease her back down while calmly pointing things out.

“Er, but waving that around in those clothes, they’re going to think you’re just a girl really into cosplay.”

“Uh…umm…”

Looking down at how she was dressed, Yukina, unable to protest, held her tongue.

A cheerleader uniform paired with a futuristic-looking silver spear. There pretty much wasn’t anyone who’d look at a middle schooler dressed like this and think,

Oh, she's a Counter-Demon Attack Mage from a secret organization! Even as she had a dissatisfied look at being mistaken for a cosplayer, Yukina gave up on pursuit of the eyewitnesses.

Kojou made a strained smile as he watched Yukina's dejected look.

"Hey. Himeragi, those clothes, is that…?"

"I ran out in the middle of fitting the outfit. Please do not stare so much."

Yukina glared up at Kojou while holding down the edge of her pleated skirt. Due to the skirt being so short, one could see what was under it with only the barest of movements.

"But you, uh, have something on under it."

"Even so, you may not look, senpai. You have a dirty look on your face."

"Hey, now, that's rude."

Kojou twisted his mouth, bothered by having such exceedingly unfair words spoken to him. Even so, he knew he ought to thank her for coming to rescue him while wearing such an embarrassing outfit. "Oh well. Anyway, I'm all right, thanks to you."

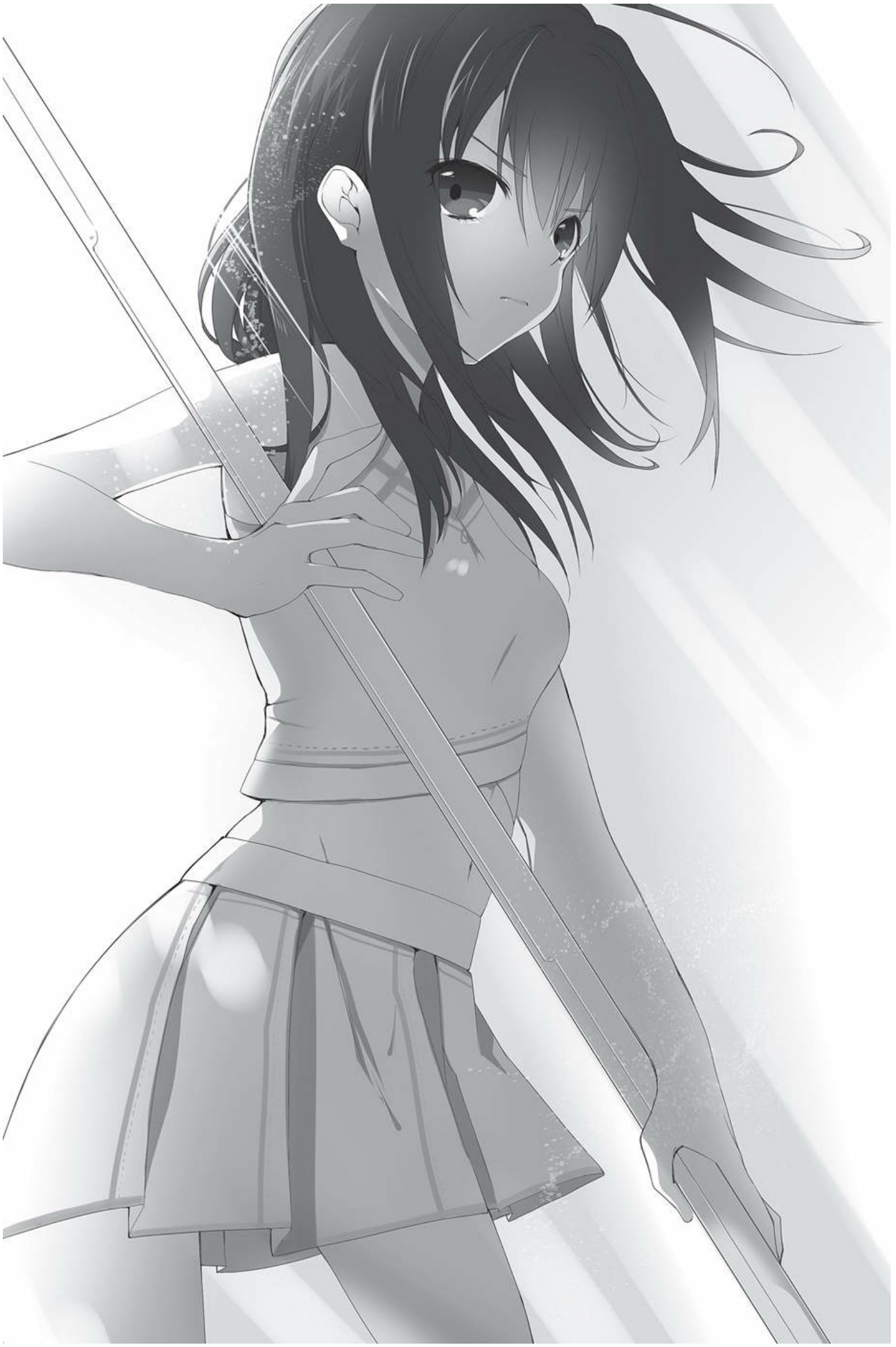
"It's nothing. It's my mission, after all." Yukina spoke in the same blunt tone she usually did. As she made the expected reply, Kojou stuck his tongue out just a little.

"Ah…and those clothes look nice on you."

"Huh?!"

That instant, Yukina's cheeks seemed to explode in a flush of red. Unable to behave calmly, she checked that her outfit was in order once more before a strange mix of embarrassment and anger came over her face as she said "thanks" in a voice that threatened to vanish entirely.

She seemed tentatively happy. Kojou watched her, thinking that it was funny how her reactions were somehow like that of a puppy.



Nagisa was fond of saying that girls should be complimented every time they wore something different. All Kojou had done was faithfully obey her words, but having seen this expression on Yukina's face, his noisy younger sister's advice proved to be well worth following.

"That origami from before… You said it's a way to send letters, right?"

While Yukina was reeling, Kojou's eyes came to rest over the ground. There was something that had fallen amid the shattered remnants of the bench. Looking like she'd regained her senses, Yukina nodded.

"Yes. That is true, but…"

"So this one's addressed to me, then."

With those words, Kojou picked up a sealed, brand-new letter. The ornate letter, embroidered with gold leaf, was elaborately sealed with silver-colored wax.

Yukina's expression hardened when she noticed what stamp it was marked with.

"That seal… It can't be…"

"Himeragi?" Seeing Yukina thrown off, Kojou spoke in a perplexed voice. "Do you know who this letter's from? I have a bad feeling about this somehow…"

"Yes…but this shouldn't be…"

As Yukina spoke, she bit her lip. The seal was decorated with a crest with a snake-and-sword design. It seemed very dignified, but Kojou felt the design was rather creepy somehow.

Kojou waited for her to continue her explanation as both of them looked down at the sealed letter.

"—Kojou?"

That was when someone unexpectedly called Kojou's name.

Hearing Kojou's voice, a classmate of his leisurely poked her head out from the shadow of the building. She was a schoolgirl with elegant facial features. Kojou and Yukina swallowed as their faces met.

“What are you doing making a ruckus back here? You have some nerve not coming to practice, leaving me there with the lovey-dovey couples and making me come looking for you…”

“A-Asagi?”

The shocked expression that came over Kojou’s face was due to the unexpected outfit she was wearing.

It was a sleeveless polo shirt with a frighteningly short, pure white tennis skirt. It wasn’t odd for a badminton uniform—and yet, given this wasn’t a public match, but rather practice for a mere sports festival, Kojou thought it was awfully revealing.

For whatever reason, Asagi was expressionless as she looked over Kojou and Yukina as they stood still. Then…

“…What’s that letter?”

“Eh?”

As she asked in a quiet voice, Kojou finally grasped the gravity of the situation.

A boy and a girl meeting behind the gym after classes, avoiding prying eyes, and held in their hands was an unusually extravagant letter. Looking at this, she must have thought that either Kojou or Yukina was giving the letter to the other…

By the thinking of any impartial observer, this was someone tenderly confessing their love.

“Did I interrupt something?” Asagi asked with an awkward expression. Her attitude was that of someone in shock.

Kojou and Yukina vigorously shook their heads at the same time.

“No, you’re not. I met Himeragi here because of an unforeseeable incident, emergency situation; it’s absolutely *not* that we’re exchanging a letter here, right, Himeragi?”

“I-indeed. This outfit’s for class cheerleading, I’m certainly not wearing it because it suits Akatsuki-senpai’s tastes…”

Even though those were the actual facts, somehow even Kojou found them strangely unconvincing. He wondered if he'd normally be in a much happier mood being sandwiched by two girls in short skirts.

Asagi maintained a strange reserve as Kojou and Yukina continued explaining in tandem. "That's enough," she said, making a long sigh. "It's fine, whatever. It doesn't have anything to do with me, anyway."

As she spoke, she made a small smile. Her smile was perfect, but Kojou did not sense the usual whimsical Asagi; rather, her smiling face seemed drained of all emotion.

Keeping that artificial smile on her face, Asagi turned her back on Kojou and Yukina.

"Ah, hey, Asagi…!"

Ignoring Kojou's words of restraint, Asagi vanished into the shadow of the building once more.

Kojou thought, as if strangely detached, that Asagi had been concerned for him, only to have undergone a heavy shock due to a complete misunderstanding.

"Oh, crap. She's going to think she has something on me for sure. I'll have to pay her something or bribe her with food to keep her quiet again…and why was she dressed like that, anyway?"

Kojou held his head, trying to understand why Asagi left surprisingly easily.

Seeing Kojou like that, Yukina looked up at him with a face that was somehow full of reproach.

"Senpai…," she muttered with a weak sigh mixed in.

7

The man was in the corner of a dreary room with bare metal showing.

The only sound in the quiet, thinly lit laboratory was that of cooling fans. The temperature was low enough to make exhales turn to white mist, no doubt to protect the electronic circuitry packed in the room like a dense grove of trees.

The image displayed by the central monitor enumerated strange written characters of unknown origin.

Without any warning, the lab's dividing doors suddenly flew open.

A group of three strange people barged in.

Two of them were men wearing black business suits. The third was a young woman wearing a dress covered in frills. The woman had a cherubic face like that of a little girl.

The man's chair creaked as he turned to face the out-of-place intruders.

"Who are you people? This is a Class Six classified zone. Entry of unauthorized personnel is strictly—…"

Glaring at them like a bird of prey whose nest had been disturbed, he threatened the men in black. But his expression went rigid mid-sentence. He noticed the ID badges that the men in the suits were wearing.

"…You are Yousuke Makimura of the Kano Alchemical Industries Research Branch, I presume."

One of the black-suited men spoke in an impersonal voice lacking in inflection.

The badges identifying the men in suits bore simple five-pointed star magic circles for personal protection. These identified the men as national Counter-Demon Attack Mages assigned to the Special District Police Counter-Demon Unit that dealt with national sorcerous offenses.

"Research Chief Makimura. We believe this laboratory is making use of materials in violation of the Sorcery Import Control Act. We demand that you hand over all research data on the premises as well as all materials."

"I-import Control Act violation?!"

The man named Makimura rose from his seat, sweat appearing on his forehead.

"Wait. There must be some mistake! This is a laboratory that decodes ancient languages. We have permission from the Administration Corporation. If you just speak to the manager…"

“A few days ago, we apprehended one of Kristof Gardos’s subordinates.”

The other black-suited man drew a pistol, informing the researcher in an overbearing manner. Makimura sharply inhaled.

“I hereby place you under arrest under Article Five of the Special District Public Security Code. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. You should be careful what you say and do.”

“Ugh…!”

The man in the black suit moved to grab Makimura’s arm and slap handcuffs on him… But that moment, the black-suited man was assailed by a dull impact.

Compared to the slender, helpless-looking Makimura, the man in the black suit had a far more robust frame. There was a weight difference between them of forty kilograms or so. But when Makimura shook the arm the man in the black suit had grabbed, it was the latter that went flying. The man in black slammed against a nearby pillar, making an anguished exhale as he collapsed onto the floor.

Just as certain reptiles altered the pigment of their cells according to their mood, Makimura was capable of changing the very nature of his cells according to his own will. He was a beast man—a werewolf. The researcher had transformed into a fearsome berserker with the strength and explosiveness of a ferocious beast.

The other man in black instantly turned his pistol on Makimura. With a well-trained motion, he fired silver and iridium alloy bullets popularly known as Lycan-Killers. However, Makimura slipped past the raining bullets and knocked the pistol out of the black-suited man’s hands.

He then made a powerful leap toward the still-open dividing doors, attempting to flee outside.

“So he is an unregistered demon…a Black Death Emperor Front sympathizer?”

The woman watching Makimura’s back as he fled, Natsuki Minamiya, murmured as if quite bored. Then, she quietly issued her command.

“…*Astarte*, I don’t mind if you’re a little rough. Arrest him.”

“Accept.”

As if to block Makimura’s escape, a small indigo-haired girl stood in front of the dividing doors.

She had white, seemingly translucent skin and blue eyes. She had a perfectly symmetrical face. The girl felt like a living being, but she seemed frail and fairylike.

The girl wore an apron dress with a large gap open over the back. Seeing the weaponless girl, the bestialized Makimura ferociously bared his fangs with a laugh.

“Homunculus?! Do you think this brat can stop me…!”

“…Execute ‘Rhododactylos.’”

The next instant, it was as if Astarte’s flesh was ripped open by the wing that emerged from her back, glowing with the colors of the rainbow. The shock wave from them warped the air inside the lab. It was a pulse of magical energy so dense that it gained solidity and physical mass. Bathed in it at close range, Makimura screamed.

“Wha…?!”

The wing that had sprouted from the girl’s back changed shape to that of a giant arm. It was the arm of a golem, covered in rainbow-colored armor. With all the force of a cannon, its fist slammed into the werewolf man head-on.

The dull, crashing sound conveyed the sense of bone and flesh being smashed.

It was might that surely would have killed any normal human. But the small girl called Astarte had apparently not held back whatsoever.

“A…a Beast Vassal?! That’s crazy… Why does a homunculus have a Beast Vassal…?!”

Coughing up a mass of blood, Makimura made a frail groan that seemed delirious.

Astarte’s expressionless eyes, like the surface of a calm lake, looked down upon Makimura as the arm extending from her back restrained his body. The true nature of that giant arm was a sentient mass of magical energy known as a

Beast Vassal.

These were summoned beasts from another world, taking physical form in exchange for consuming the life force of their host.

As familiars went, these were the worst of the worst, suddenly exhausting the life force of their summoners and granting them death.

But by the same token, the combat ability of a Beast Vassal was immense. It was because vampires could use Beast Vassals that they were the most feared of all demonkind.

And only vampires, with infinite “negative” life forces, could tame Beast Vassals…

Astarte was the one and only exception. For Rhododactylos was an artificial Beast Vassal constructed for a certain objective by a Lotharingian Armed Apostle.

Makimura, unable to maintain his bestialized state due to the heavy wounds he’d sustained, coughed violently as he returned to human form. Rushing over while they had the chance, the men in black suits fastened a metal ring around Makimura’s neck. It was an anti-demon restraining device that employed a weak electrical current to throw the nervous system into haywire and prevent bestialization.

“…I’m very sorry, instructor Minamiya. Your aid was invaluable.”

One of the men in black, pressing down on his broken arm, said words of thanks to Natsuki. She elegantly shook her head as she opened up a black-frilled fan.

“No need to thank me. I’m not the one who did the work.”

As she spoke, she made an annoyed-sounding snort. Though her manner of speech was overbearing, her overly childish-sounding voice and natural-born grace kept it from feeling grating.

Indeed, the men in black looked quite pleased at how coldly she treated them. It was all part of Natsuki’s charm.

In the meantime, she looked over several photographs spread out over

Makimura's desk.

They were photos of stone tablets that had been excavated from some ancient ruin. Engraved on the faces of the stone tablets were the same indecipherable symbols as those displayed on the laboratory's monitor. But merely by looking at those lines of text, she instinctively understood.

What was written here contained frighteningly dangerous power…

"So this is what the Black Death Emperor Front went through the trouble of smuggling in from Southeast Asia… It seems to be no mere relic after all… Where's the original?"

"…Cannot confirm target. Hypothesis: Target has already been removed from this facility," Astarte casually replied to Natsuki's musings. The homunculus girl pointed to a metal shipping case left in a corner of the room.

Though it was a special type that had ritualistic seals piled upon it, it was empty, the seals already broken.

Someone must have taken the stone tablets contained within somewhere else.

"So we're too late, in other words?"

As she asked herself in a voice of displeasure, Natsuki looked up at the image displayed by the monitor.

Somehow, Makimura had used his own company's research facilities to decipher the stone tablet. But the deciphering was not yet complete; the only thing he'd managed to decipher was a single word. Natsuki's expression sharpened as she looked over the characters that spelled "Nalakuvera."

"This is insane… What are you thinking, Kristof Gardos…?"

Makimura, still on the floor, made a high-pitched laugh as he listened to their conversation.

It was the loud, mad laugh of a terrorist who yearned for global destruction.

8

Kojou Akatsuki was walking along a seaside footpath illuminated by the rays of

the evening sun.

Beside him was Yukina, carrying her guitar case on her back. Thanks to Asagi's whims turning sports festival practice into a pretzel, they'd ended up just going home together.

Both were taking a minor detour, heading to a supermarket close to where they lived. Thanks to Nagisa coming back late from club activity, buying ingredients for supper on the way back to her place had become a daily ritual for them.

"The sender is…Dimitrie Vattler, Duke of Ardeal… Who's that?" Along the way, Kojou gave her the sealed envelope they picked up behind the gym, mumbling with a perplexed look.

The letter left behind by the metal *shikigami* was an invitation to a party to be held that night. It was apparently a pretty big deal held on a cruise ship moored at Itogami Island.

But Kojou didn't know anyone named Vattler. Of course, he couldn't imagine why he'd been invited to this party. He had a bad feeling about the whole thing.

"The principality of Ardeal is one of the self-governing territories within the Warlord's Empire," Yukina explained in a grave tone. Kojou and Yukina had just arrived at the supermarket they were headed for. The air-conditioned air flowing out of the automatic door entryway felt really good.

Kojou replied with a question as he put a shopping basket on top of a shopping cart left near the entrance.

"The Warlord's Empire?"

"A Dominion in Eastern Europe…the land under the control of the First Primogenitor. You know about the First Primogenitor, the 'Lost Warlord,' yes?"

"I've heard the name, at least. That's the vampire conqueror served by seventy-two Beast Vassals…isn't it?"

Kojou was flabbergasted that something so completely nonsensical had come out of his own mouth.

After all, even a single Beast Vassal controlled by a primogenitor-class vampire

could wipe out a city or two; they were genuine monsters. He couldn't wrap his mind around controlling *dozens* of them.

He felt like he should doubt that such a being could even exist.

It was actually Kojou, thinking such thoughts, who was the World's Mightiest Vampire, surpassing even the First Primogenitor, but…

"It is said that the Holy Ground Treaty that enabled the coexistence of man and demon was made possible only with that ruler's cooperation. Otherwise, the remaining primogenitors probably never would have joined the negotiations, for even among fellow primogenitors, the Warlord's Empire boasts overwhelming military superiority and is the oldest Dominion."

Yukina explained the frightening power of the First Primogenitor like she was chiding the nonchalant Kojou. Kojou quietly shrugged his shoulders. At any rate, the problem in front of him wasn't the "Lost Warlord" himself.

"…So, this Vattler guy is a retainer of that First Primogenitor?"

"That's what it amounts to. He's a noble ruling his own autonomous territory —in other words, a blood relation of the First Primogenitor himself, what one might call a pure bloodline vampire."

"Hmmm."

Relying on the note Nagisa had given him, Kojou stuffed vegetables and fruits into the shopping cart. The ingredients were enough to feed three people, enough for Kojou, Nagisa, and Yukina. This was the result of Nagisa, well aware Yukina lived by herself, strenuously inviting her over for supper.

Nagisa was overjoyed at having someone to talk to during meals, after all. Kojou was quite grateful that Yukina was playing the role of listener in his stead. In the first place, with observing Kojou being Yukina's prime objective, it wasn't exactly a bad deal for her, either. So, since all of their interests coincided, it had at some point become customary for Yukina to come to the Akatsuki residence for supper.

"What's a big shot like him coming to Itogami Island for? Hey…that's too many onions!"

“You mustn’t be picky about your vegetables. Also, I think his aim is probably to meet you, senpai.”

“It couldn’t be because I’m the Fourth Primogenitor, is it…?”

“There really wouldn’t be any other reason…and senpai, don’t sneak green onions back onto the counter. You are not a child.”

Yukina sighed as Kojou brought the greenish-yellow onions he detested back into the cart. They looked like a young, recently married couple getting along nicely as they shopped, but neither of them realized it. They were trying to converse about what was a rather serious subject.

Actually, between the store employees and the neighbors, people whispered rumors about such as, “They’re living together?” “Not brother and sister?” “He seems to live with some other girl…,” “Don’t tell me the three are living together…,” and so on, but of course the persons concerned did not notice any of this.

“Why does some vampire from somewhere in Europe know my name…?”

Kojou murmured in dissatisfaction as he checked the name the invitation was addressed to one more time.

Yukina, seemingly feeling guilty somehow, made a sigh.

“I believe he noticed your existence because of the Lotharingian Armed Apostle incident in recent days. It’s because you spectacularly burned the city like you did…”

“That wasn’t me! That Beast Vassal did it on its own!”

“Of course, I understand that…but the world at large may not think so.”

“Shit…that’s no reason for some piece of origami to come attacking me. Did he come all the way overseas to pick a fight?”

Kojou made a groan of loathing as he recalled the steel beasts he’d encountered at school. He managed there because Yukina had come, but if she had not, Kojou’s Beast Vassals might have gone berserk.

For someone well aware of the danger posed by a primogenitor’s Beast Vassals, it was a rather violent way of doing things.

“A declaration of war…perhaps?”

Yukina’s lips formed the ominous words. A primogenitor holding sway over a Dominion was treated the same as a national army under international law. Kojou, though lacking both retainers and brethren, was technically no exception.

“Although it is not impossible, I believe he seeks negotiation for the moment…”

“So I’ve gotta respond to this invitation either way, huh…?”

As Kojou unfurled the invitation as he spoke, a perplexed look came over his face as he read the content.

As Yukina’s sharp eyes picked that up, she dubiously looked up at Kojou.

“Senpai? What’s wrong?”

“Err…it kinda says here to bring my partner with me…”

“Partner?” Yukina went “ahh” and made an affirming nod. “Come to think of it, it’s standard to bring one’s spouse or lover with you when attending a party in the West.”

“…Hey, this is a pretty big problem, out of the blue like this. What’s a single guy supposed to do?”

“In this circumstance, perhaps you could ask an acquaintance to act as a substitute?”

“Substitute…you say.”

Kojou’s lips twisted as if he was conflicted. A substitute for a lover would have to be someone close in age, a family member or good friend, and furthermore, of the opposite sex…

“I can’t take Nagisa to a party hosted by vampires, and Asagi seems angry over something, and I don’t really wanna get her wrapped up in anything bad, anyway…”

“I suppose not.” Yukina cutely cleared her throat and looked at Kojou. “I think you have no choice but to select someone who knows your true nature and who can deal with dangerous situations.”

“Suppose so.”

Kojou lowered his eyes and made a reluctant sigh at how troublesome this was.

“I don’t like involving her, but…maybe I can try asking Natsuki.”

“Wh-what?”

Yukina’s eyes went wide with shock and froze that way. Kojou didn’t notice as he scratched his head.

“I’m scared what favor she’s gonna drag out of me later, but this ain’t the time or place to complain… Well, I bet she’ll come along to a mere party if one of her adorable pupils seriously asks her to.”

“…How did Ms. Minamiya’s name come up there?” Yukina asked in a low voice. There was no great change in her facial expression, but her every word was so charged with electricity that they conveyed a very thorny impression. She seemed upset for some reason.

“Er, I mean, she knows all about my condition, she has her Counter-Demon Mage certification, so she’s suitable, right? Although I do think looking a little too young might be a bit of a problem.”

“I believe there is someone else who is of appropriate age, who knows your condition, and who also has Counter-Demon Agent Agacertification, senpai,” Yukina murmured in a blunt tone, almost as if speaking to herself. As Kojou listened, he finally realized the reason for Yukina’s anger.

“Can I ask you to come? It’s not gonna be a problem with the Lion King Agency?”

“It cannot be helped. In this instance, I think letting you out of my sight would be the greater problem, senpai.”

Yukina spoke coldly, as if to conceal her blush. Seeing her mood somehow recovering, Kojou breathed a sigh of relief and made a strained smile.

“I see. Sorry.”

“No, watching you is my mission after all, senpai…ah!”

After speaking in a tone of jest, Yukina's expression suddenly darkened.

"Himeragi? So there is some kind of problem?"

"I suppose it…could be a problem. I do not have clothes to wear to a party."

Yukina had a brooding look as she bit her lip. Watching her face like that from the side for a while, Kojou spontaneously burst into laughter. As Kojou's slumped shoulders shook, Yukina snapped him an indignant glare.

"Is something funny?"

"Er, sorry. I thought, you're just like Cinderella. So even you worry about these things, Himeragi."

"…I suppose so. If I am the soot-covered princess, you must be the mean stepsister, senpai."

The gaze Yukina turned toward Kojou was like ice. Kojou looked a bit hurt.

"If you're not gonna say I'm the prince, at least make me the wizard or something!"

"In the Grimm fairy tale, Cinderella scraped the heels and toes off the mean stepsisters and put their eyes out. Please be careful, senpai."

"…I'm thinking you'll look cute in anything, so it's not that much of a problem, Himeragi."

Kojou strived to put on an earnest face as he spoke. He did not intend it as idle flattery, since this was his honest opinion, but all the same…

"You're so transparent, senpai."

Yukina simply made a sigh, as if giving up. Still angry, Yukina walked off at a rapid pace, with Kojou pushing the cart ahead of him as he followed.

Having finished their shopping, Kojou and Yukina carried various shopping bags as they headed home.

The evening sun had already sunk below the horizon; dusk was already starting to envelop the city. It was three hours and change until when Dimitrie Vattler's party was due to start. That really wasn't much time to spare.

"If you went all the way to Island West, there's rental shops, but I doubt they'd

still be open at this hour. Nagisa doesn't have any clothes for a party, either, so maybe borrowing something from Natsuki might be our only…"

"Ms. Minamiya's Western clothes…you mean…? I don't think I can wear them, though…"

Yukina pressed upon her own breasts as she muttered. Certainly, both were small girls, but Natsuki was still significantly smaller than Yukina, both in height and in overall figure.

"Er, but…"

"I won't wear it, but what is it?"

Kojou, who was about to say there wasn't much difference between them in breast size, went silent as Yukina glared at him. The glacial atmosphere continued until Kojou and Yukina arrived back at their apartment building. Then…

"What's that package?"

Kojou inclined his head slightly as he noticed a slip with a delivery notice on it. Apparently a package had been delivered to the locker for home deliveries. Though nothing came to mind, Kojou held no special doubts as he opened the locker.

Inside was a flat, rectangular cardboard box. Considering its size, it wasn't very heavy.

But when they saw the name of the sender on the package, both Kojou and Yukina were beside themselves.

"Lion King Agency?"

"But…why to senpai's address?"

Both of them were in shock at the package from a completely unexpected sender.

The Lion King Agency was a special agency under the Japanese government for dealing with large-scale sorcerous disasters and terrorism.

Their having dispatched Yukina to be Kojou's watcher was also for natural

security… In other words, they had judged Kojou's very existence to be a grave threat on a national scale.

And yet, such a group had gone out of its way to send something to Kojou. Kojou couldn't believe it meant anything good.

Even Yukina, a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, seemed to be in the dark about what it was.

Kojou and Yukina's eyes met with sharp looks on their faces, seemingly hardening their resolve before stretching their hands toward the top of the cardboard box. They cautiously peeled the wrapping off, opening the parcel with bated breath.

Within the box was something meticulously folded, made of thin, glossy fabric. It was clearly made of expensive material. Kojou immediately came to suspect that there was some kind of curse embedded in it. However, Yukina only shook her head in silence. Apparently she did not sense any special danger.

Kojou spotted a note with fine print in the corner of the package's box and picked it up. In the meantime, Yukina gently pulled up the fabric by the edge. With a soft rustle, it spread into a skirt with voluminous frills. The rest of what was packed gently fell with a soft patter. It was an slip, complete with cups, and silk underwear.

"The heck is this…Order-Made Party Dress, Type One? Height a hundred and fifty-six centimeters, B seventy-six, W fifty-five, H seventy-eight, C sixty…to Miss Yukina Himeragi, paid in full…eh?"

As Kojou read what was written on the note out loud, he suddenly lifted his head, looking at Yukina, who stood right before his eyes.

Looking from the slip in the grasp of the red-faced Yukina back to the note with mysterious letters and numbers on it, Kojou finally grasped the reason why Yukina's shoulders were shaking in embarrassment.

An awkward silence came over the two. Feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Kojou judged that remaining quiet was a poor plan of action. Thinking he ought to console her first, he looked to the chest of her uniform.

"Err…C, huh? More there than I thought. Mm, I'm impressed."

That instant, the air itself seemed to freeze over. The expressionless Yukina's entire body emitted an incredible surge of bloodlust. Realizing he'd spoken poorly, Kojou stiffened, unable to move, like a corpse in rigor mortis.

"Is that all you have to say *before I erase your memory*, senpai?"

With a wobble, Yukina soundlessly rose up, clenching her fists as she posed her question to Kojou. *Wait, calm down, deep breath,* he thought. Kojou desperately tried to talk her down.

"It's all right, Himeragi. The dress has dress padding and everyth—"

Before Kojou finished that last word, Yukina's unleashed heel plunged down onto Kojou's crown. "Hrgh!!" he uttered in anguish as he clutched his head. Looking down at him, Yukina's cheeks swelled up in what seemed like a pout.

9

A little past 9:00 p.m., Kojou finished changing his clothes and came out of his room.

He was wearing a three-piece tuxedo. It had been packed together with Yukina's dress in the package sent by the Lion King Agency. Their objective was unclear, but apparently the Lion King Agency bunch wanted Kojou and Yukina to meet this aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire.

Though he found being used for no apparent reason to be distasteful, it's not as if he had any other clothes he could wear to a party. The clothes had committed no crime, Kojou told himself as he fastened his necktie and closed the buttons of his vest, heading toward the entryway. Then…

"K-Kojou? What's that? What's with those clothes?"

Having come face-to-face with Kojou in the living room, Nagisa, fresh out of the bath, widened her eyes as she looked at him.

Her hair was drenched; her cheeks were still a little pink. With water droplets still on her skin, she looked quite defenseless with only a bath towel wrapped around her. Kojou was a bit taken aback at her gawking at his outfit while she walked around like *that*.

“Ah, this. Actually I’m doin’ a part-time job.”

He gave her the excuse he’d thought up beforehand.

Nagisa was instantly taken aback, looking over Kojou’s whole figure in what seemed like shock.

“A part-time job? At night?”

“I’m subbing for a classmate who collapsed from workin’ too hard. It’s just for tonight. On his end, his parents have a hundred and fifty million yen debt left to pay, so if I don’t do this in his place, they won’t be able to pay the medical costs for his sick older sister.”

“I-is that so…?”

Kojou thought it was a sorry excuse by his standards, but Nagisa seemed to believe it with surprising ease. The tuxedo must have added credibility. In point of fact, a normal high school student had very few opportunities to wear something like this unless he was part-timing at a bar.

“I guess it can’t be helped. But don’t do anything indecent,” Nagisa warned him with an uneasy expression.

What in the world is she worried about? Kojou thought with a pained smile.

“Yeah, it’s okay. Not gonna happen. Sorry about leaving you to hold the fort, but thanks.”

“Yeah, I get it… You take care, Kojou.”

Kojou left while Nagisa saw him off with a cheerful wave.

Though he of course felt guilty about tricking his younger sister, he couldn’t be honest with her and say he was meeting a vampire from the Warlord’s Empire, so it couldn’t be helped.

Kojou went into the corridor, making an annoyed exhale, thoroughly disgusted with himself.

As he did so, Kojou sensed someone right beside him coming even closer, as if to nestle against him.

When Kojou looked, there stood Yukina. She’d no doubt heard Kojou’s

conversation with Nagisa.

Glancing sideways at the door to the Akatsuki residence, she spoke as if trying to console Kojou.

“Nagisa’s a good girl.”

“Well, the wilder a story, the easier she’ll believe it, you could…sa…”

As Kojou spoke, turning around to face Yukina, he was suddenly at a loss for words.

His gaze was stolen by the outfit so very different from what she usually wore.

It was a white party dress with deep blue highlights. The cleavage was conservative, but in contrast, the outfit was boldly cut from her shoulders all the way down her back. The thin fabric made the contours of Yukina’s body stand out, with her white, firm thighs poking out from under her elegantly frilled miniskirt.

As might be expected of something made-to-order, it suited Yukina to a frightening degree. The outfit was tidy, pretty, and gave off a slightly risqué feeling. Even Kojou, well acquainted with Yukina’s beauty, could only look in shock with a dumbstruck look on his face.

“Senpai?”

As if delivering a warning, Yukina glared at Kojou with her eyes half-narrowed.

“Y-yeah?”

“This outfit… It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not at all… But! Eh?! Wa… Why’re you pointing that spear at me?!”

Seeing the tip of her spear thrust right before his eyes, Kojou’s expression tensed in a hurry. Still keeping her silver spear at the ready, Yukina coolly gazed at Kojou, finally speaking in a sharp tone.

“I’m sorry. I sensed danger and reacted without thinking.”

“Th-that so.”

Kojou’s face scowled as he sensed the presence of a metallic scent inside his nostrils.

Though he was poorly aware of it himself, Kojou was now a vampire, and the vampire species was known as such because of the existence of a dangerous instinct. Namely, vampiric urges—the craving to sink his fangs into another's neck and suck on blood that he desperately wanted to resist. And the trigger for vampiric urges was lust. Just now, Kojou, aroused from looking at Yukina, had apparently been in danger of having his mind taken over by vampiric urges. Yukina had no doubt drawn Snowdrift Wolf because she'd instinctively sensed that.

So this is a Sword Shaman's Spirit Sight, he thought in quiet admiration.

"…You're too easy to understand, senpai. When you're thinking indecent thoughts, it's written all over your face."

Timed as if she was reading Kojou's mind, Yukina spoke with a sigh mixed in.

"The back really is…too exposed, isn't it? The fabric's thin, the skirt so short, it's just…"

"Means it's easy to move in, doesn't it? It's better than if the skirt's in your way if it comes down to a fight."

"…Even if what you say is sensible, your ulterior motive's smeared all over your face."

"It is not."

Kojou sullenly groaned. Yukina made a small shrug, and thinking something, she suddenly tugged down on the edge of her skirt a little.

"Well, it's fine. The underskirt the cheerleading club gave me has been put to good use."

"An underskirt?!"

Unconsciously leaning his body forward, Kojou slumped his shoulders as he lamented.

"Senpai, so you really were…"

"Er, no. I wasn't trying to peek at all, I just mean, an underskirt with that outfit is like, unfair, I feel like my dreams have been shattered, I mean, the reason Schrödinger's cat has philosophers all worked up is because they don't know for

sure if it's dead or alive…"

"I have no idea what you are referring to, but I do take from it that you have an extraordinary interest in what is under a girl's skirt, senpai."

"So stop pointing that spear at me already!"

Kojou, driven all the way back to the wall, made desperate, pleading gestures.

"Senpai, really, you're…"

For some reason, Yukina made a sigh of apparent surrender, quietly lowering her spear. She transformed it back to its storage configuration and put it in the case at her feet.

What she had with her was not the usual black guitar case, but a case with an attaché-style handle. It didn't seem all that out of place with her party-dress look. She looked like a player of a classical instrument heading to an orchestral theater performance. Then…

"This outfit…it's really not ridiculous?"

Yukina, closing the case and standing up, suddenly looked up at Kojou with upturned eyes, inquiring in a quiet voice.

"No, not at all. It looks good on you."

"Is that so?"

Kojou nodded curtly in reply and proceeded to walk with Yukina ahead to the elevator. Where her hair was raised, her nape was faintly red. She seemed to be secretly blushing.

Kojou inclined his head as he noticed the hair ornament holding Yukina's hair up. It was a silver hair clip styled like a Christian cross. It wasn't in the box of stuff sent by the Lion King Agency, either. It was rare for Yukina, who had few personal possessions, to accessorize herself in this way.

"Himeragi, that hair ornament…"

"Eh…?"

Yukina put her hand to her hair in surprise, wearing an expression like that of a child whose prank had been discovered.

“Is this…odd, by any chance?”

“No, not at all. It suits you.”

Kojou repeated the exact same line from earlier. This time, too, an honestly happy look came over Yukina.

“Sayaka…my roommate when I was at High God Forest…gave this to me.”

“Roommate? Is she a Sword Shaman like you are?”

Kojou asked, his interest somewhat aroused.

High God Forest was the name of the all-girls school Yukina had attended until only the last month.

However, it was really a Counter-Demon Attack Mage educational facility for the Lion King Agency.

Yukina had told him that her own Sword Shaman abilities were drilled into her in that place.

He thought it highly unlikely a girl living together with Yukina would be an ordinary person with no connection to ritual magic.

“She is not a Sword Shaman, but Sayaka is a CDMA for the Lion King Agency as well.”

Yukina gave the answer Kojou expected. For some reason, her voice was tinged with pride.

“She’s one year older than I am, so she’s already left High God Forest on an official assignment.”

“Huh… Good friends, you two?”

Yukina made a shy assenting nod to Kojou’s murmur.

“I suppose so. I think of her as a sister, really. She’s beautiful and cute, and her personality is cute, too; she’s so gentle… I’m proud to have had her for a roommate.”

“Makes me wanna meet her a little,” Kojou thought out loud in a casual mood. That instant, Yukina’s expression suddenly darkened.

She touched her hair ornament once and informed him in a very small voice, “It might be best that you do not, senpai… I think it’s likely she’d seek to kill you.”

10

The cruise ship of Dimitrie Vattler, Duke of Ardeal, was moored at a huge pier on Island West. The party was due to begin at 10:00 p.m. They could see a large group of invitees climbing the gangway and getting aboard the ship.

“…A floating graveyard…huh? Name’s in pretty bad taste.”

Looking up at the name engraved onto the hull, Kojou was beside himself as he read the ship’s name, *Oceanus Grave*.

But in spite of the ominous name, the lit-up hull had a palatial, elegant dignity proudly on display under the evening sky.

“That’s his personal…? Geez, how rich are these Warlord’s Empire aristocrats, anyway?”

“I believe there is a strategic objective in proudly displaying his authority in this manner,” Yukina explained in a serene tone.

“Though it is mere superstition that vampires cannot cross the ocean, it is nonetheless true that their abilities are limited when over water. For a Dominion such as this, its nobles merely boarding ships openly acts as a show of force toward other nations. That’s even if it’s mere civilian ships rather than warships.”

“Hmm…or maybe it’s just that they like showin’ off.”

His mood rather weighed down, Kojou looked up at the blue-white hull once again.

The civilian vessel *Oceanus Grave* bore no weaponry. However, the ship’s owner was a vampire noble. The Beast Vassals he could summon had combat ability equal to top-notch aircraft carriers. In other words, Itogami Island currently had the equivalent of a Dominion warship here, right before its eyes—a delicate situation.

Perhaps because of that, many of the people boarding the *Oceanus Grave* had faces he'd seen on the news. They were big-shot politicians and financial heavy hitters, VIPs from the government and Itogami City.

Since the party's host was a noble from the Warlord's Empire, this much was not unnatural by any means. But…

"…We're the only ones who look out of place, huh?"

Kojou muttered to himself, "I wonder if coming here was the right call," feeling quite uneasy.

Now that he thought about it, that invitation could have been a forgery sent by someone to trick Kojou and Yukina. Given the circumstances of the invitation's arrival, it wasn't exactly baseless speculation.

However, as Kojou thought of such things, Yukina looked up at him, looking beside herself.

"No, an envoy from the First Primogenitor arriving on this island should greet the ruler of this land, the Fourth Primogenitor, before all others. You are the main guest of the party, senpai. Please act more appropriately."

"Easier said than done, geez. I'm just a normal high schooler!" Kojou weakly objected. Though arbitrarily treated by others around him like a primogenitor, Kojou himself had been a normal human being until a few months ago. Even if he stuck out like a sore thumb here, there was no reason for him to know how to act "appropriately."

When his invitation was checked and he boarded the ship, he felt even more like a fish out of water: The lighting was dazzling, the food was exquisite, all these important-looking people gathered in one place. A young man like Kojou walking around warranted no more of a glance than a rock on the side of the road.

"So…where's the guy who called us over here, anyway?" Kojou murmured as he looked around the interior of the reception hall, continuing to feel very out of his element.

The reception hall inside the ship, now a party venue, was unthinkably large. There had to be at least five hundred invitees.

Finding an envoy of the First Primogenitor, whose face he didn't even know, in the middle of that was no simple task.

But on the other hand, Kojou had had a strange feeling since the moment after he came aboard the ship.

It was like the rise one got just before starting a basketball game. Fear, delight, the sense of urgency and exhilaration all seemingly combined into a single pleasant sense of tension.

Realizing he was close to one of his brethren possessing great power, he felt like every nerve of his body was sharpened. As a vampire, Kojou's blood…and the Beast Vassals that dwelled within…boiled in anticipation of encountering a powerful enemy.

That stirring told him that the noble from the Warlord's Empire was without doubt very close.

"Above us. Duke Ardeal is likely on the external upper deck…"

As if to confirm Kojou's premonition, Yukina spoke while looking up above her head. Similar to Kojou, Yukina likely knew where Dimitrie Vattler was thanks to her Sword Shaman's Spirit Sight.

"Upper deck…huh? How do we get up there then?"

"This way, senpai."

Yukina pointed to a stairway in the corner of the hall, making her way along a path where invitees were mingling.

As Kojou hurried to catch up to her, Yukina looked back and extended her hand. Without questioning at all, he moved to grasp her hand.

It was the next moment that Kojou sensed a silver flash, accompanied by bloodlust, swooping down at him.

"…Sei!!"

"Uoo?!"

As Kojou instantly leaped back, the well-sharpened tip of a fork right before his eyes grazed his arm.

The fork was gripped by a young woman. She appeared nearly 170 centimeters in height, but seemed to be a girl still in her midteens. She had long, chestnut-colored hair and white skin. Her face had a charming, eye-catching elegance about it.

The cheongsam-style outfit she wore over her slender body suited her very well.

“Pardon me. My hand slipped.”

The long-haired girl spoke, not acting like she was particularly sorry. Kojou glared at her in displeasure.

“If you know how someone can *slip* and swing a fork down at someone else’s arm, by all means, tell me… Wait, weren’t you yelling like some martial artist just now?!”

“It is because you tried to touch Yukina with your filthy, lust-stained hand, Kojou Akatsuki.”

“What…?!”

Kojou stared at her in surprise at her knowing his name. She continued to hold her fork backward while giving Kojou a frigid glare.

The aura she gave off was a little like Yukina’s right after they met, but this one was far more hostile. It seemed like, if he showed the slightest opening, she would attack him without mercy.

“Who the heck are you?”

Kojou was perplexed as he asked her. The party guests all around them were raising their voices in alarm. Yukina arrived back the next moment.

“…Sayaka?!”

Wedging herself between the glaring parties, Yukina looked dumbfounded as she called out the long-haired girl’s name.

That moment, the girl named Sayaka showed a highly dramatic change. Like a hard bud blossoming into a flower, an elegant smile broadened over her entire face, with the surge of bloodlust emanating from her entire body replaced with an aura full of gentle affection.

“Yukina!”

The long-haired girl gave Yukina an earnest hug. Kojou felt like he was watching sisters who got along well being miraculously reunited. Her hair, in a ponytail behind her, swayed like the tail of a happy dog.

“It’s been so long, Yukina. Have you been well?”

“Y-yes.”

Yukina seemed a bit at a loss at being suddenly reunited with the girl. She looked like surprise was winning against her joy at being back together. But not paying any heed to Yukina's reaction, the girl called Sayaka pressed her own cheek against Yukina's neck, rubbing it.

"Ahh, Yukina, Yukina, Yukina…!! You poor thing, having watcher duty on the Fourth Primogenitor pushed on you while I wasn't there! I wonder what made the Lion King Agency Executive Committee treat my Yukina in such a cruel manner!"

"Ah, er…Sayaka…?!"

"But it's all right now. If this pervert lays one finger on you, I will immediately eliminate him. Both in a societal and a biological sense…"

"Wa…! S-Sayaka…that's a bit…yah!"

"Hey."

As Sayaka fawned over Yukina, leaving herself wide open, Kojou delivered a chop to the back of her head. "Eek!" Sayaka exclaimed in a bitter voice, seemingly startled as she pulled back.

Yukina, finally released from Sayaka's clutches, had a look of relief on her face as she circled behind Kojou's back.

Sayaka, pressing a hand to the back of her head where she was smacked, glared sharply at Kojou.

"What are you doing?! Don't touch me, Fourth Primogenitor! No, *Pervogenitor*!"

"Who's the pervert?! Take that back! Primo and Perv don't sound anything alike, so you did that on purpose!" Kojou bared his teeth as he yelled back.

With a "hmph," Sayaka exhaled roughly "I suppose. I'm sorry, oh Great Pervert Primogenitor. First off, I don't want Yukina breathing the same air as you, so I don't want you entering a five-meter radius around her. After that, I'll gouge out your eyeballs. I won't have your impure gaze looking at Yukina."

"Like hell you will! What the heck's with you, popping out and mouthing off like this?"

“Don’t come any closer. It’s gross,” Sayaka shouted as she threateningly thrust the fork at Kojou.

What a rude woman, Kojou thought indignantly as he turned back toward Yukina.

“Sayaka, that’s the ex-roommate you mentioned, isn’t it, Himeragi?”

“…Yes.”

Yukina looked up at Kojou and nodded in a way that seemed apologetic somehow. As if trying to interrupt their conversation, Sayaka wedged herself in from the side.

“Sayaka Kirasaka, War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, Kojou *Baka*tsuki.”

“It’s A-ka-tsu-ki. Don’t say it wrong on purpose!” Kojou yelled back, having had quite enough.

Mysteriously, in spite of having raised such a ruckus, the guests in the party venue didn’t seem to be taking much notice. It seemed Yukina had quietly used an aversion incantation.

“What’s a War Dancer? Is that different from a Sword Shaman?” Kojou asked Yukina another question. Yukina shook her head a little.

“Both are Counter-Demon Attack Mages, but the skills we are trained in differ.”

“Skills?”

Looking at Kojou raising his eyebrows, Sayaka announced with pride. “War Dancers specialize in curses and assassinations. In other words, it is my duty to eliminate perverts hovering around Yukina, like you.”

“I’m not hovering around her! If someone’s being hovered around, it’s me!!”

“What are you so proud of?! It’s not like I’m jealous or anything!”

“Then don’t say stuff that makes people think you’re jealous!”

Kojou and Sayaka both glared at each other indignantly. Yukina covered her eyes while weakly shaking her head.

“But why are you here, Sayaka? Weren’t you assigned to Multinational Sorcery

Crimes in the Foreign Branch?”

“I still am. I came to this island because of my mission.” Sayaka answered in a gentle tone of voice that seemed to come from a different person. Yukina narrowed her eyes in surprise.

“Your mission?”

“Same as yours, Yukina. Watcher duty over a vampire. It’s my duty to watch over Duke Ardeal so that he does not bring about any harm to the residents of Itogami City. At the moment I’m here because he asked me to show you in.”

Hearing Sayaka’s careless explanation, Kojou finally grasped the circumstances.

Just like Yukina had come to Itogami Island on watcher duty, Sayaka had been ordered to observe Vattler.

Not that it accounted for her trying to stab Kojou with a fork out of the blue, but…

“Fine then. Show us in already.”

“I’ll bring you with me, but not because *you* said so. So please die already, like now.”

“Hell no!” Yelling back in annoyance, Kojou trailed behind Sayaka up the stairs. Yukina, last in line, gave both of them a worried look.

Looking over Sayaka’s graceful form from behind, Kojou let out an exasperated sigh.

She’d said Vattler requested that she bring Kojou and Yukina to him.

That being the case, she’d likely been the one who’d sent the invitation along with the *shikigami* that had attacked Kojou during the day.

It wasn’t that she had any strategic objective; she just plain hated Kojou’s guts.

Apparently, Sayaka was enveloped by deep, sister-like affection toward Yukina. So, from her point of view, Kojou was a wicked vampire putting her precious Yukina in danger.

Kojou was afraid to even think about how Sayaka would react if she found out he'd sucked Yukina's blood. Now he understood quite well why Yukina had been worried Sayaka would come for his neck.

But to Kojou, Sayaka wasn't the real threat here.

The stirring in Kojou's "blood" grew even fiercer. The primogenitor's blood that flowed within Kojou's body told him that a vampire possessing vast power was nearby.

Kojou didn't know the other guy's true nature or his objective. He didn't think that the cease-fire agreement between the primogenitors applied to the Fourth Primogenitor, who didn't officially exist. Depending on how negotiations went, worst case, combat might break out right there.

He was a noble of the Warlord's Empire. A pure-blooded vampire directly descended from a primogenitor. Even if not on the same level as the First Primogenitor, it was safe to think he possessed combat ability near the same scale.

To the contrary, even though Kojou was called the Fourth Primogenitor, he couldn't use the vast majority of those abilities. He figured he had next to no chance of victory in a straight-up fight.

Feelings of unease and confusion seeping through once more, Kojou climbed onto the ship's upper deck.

There was a lone man there, standing in the corner of the broad deck against a jet-black sea and the night sky.

He was a handsome young man wearing a coat that was pure white. He was tall, but his contours were refined, not overbearing in any way.

Stroking his blond hair back, the young man looked at Kojou with his pale blue eyes.

That moment, his entire body was enveloped on a beam of pure white light.

"…Senpai!"

Yukina was the first to respond. Drawing her spear from her instrument case, she leaped in front of Kojou. To shield Yukina, Sayaka moved as well. It was all in

the blink of an eye.

However, even the girls' prompt actions could not protect them from the pure white beam.

The true nature of the light unleashed by the man in the coat was a serpent of flame glowing with white. It was a vampire's Beast Vassal surrounded by scorching heat. Even as the Beast Vassal shot out at the speed of a comet, Kojou made no reaction whatsoever. He didn't even know what was happening.

"Guo…oo…!"

It was not Kojou who reacted, but the Beast Vassals that dwelled in Kojou's *blood*. Dazzling lightning enveloped Kojou's entire body, releasing a lightning bolt that counter-attacked the serpent of flame.

This was one of the twelve Beast Vassals that served the Fourth Primogenitor. It was the thunderbolt of "Regulus Aurum," the only Beast Vassal Kojou could properly control. It fended off the attack in the place of its dumbfounded master.

Firing indiscriminately with such enormous power would have destroyed the ship, and perhaps the entire harbor with it…but apparently, this time, even the calamitous lion Beast Vassal had thought better of it.

The moment the pure white flaming serpent was annihilated, Kojou's lightning was annihilated as well.

"Th…that was close! The heck was that?!"

Witnessing the scorched deck and the burning air, the aftereffects of the violent collision of two vast magical forces made Kojou, finally back to his senses, raise his voice. That moment, the sound of light clapping echoed through the air.

The clapping came from the man in the white coat. Having launched the attack at Kojou to begin with, he actually seemed pleased that Kojou had fended it off.

"My, my, quite splendid. So that level of Beast Vassal was indeed unable to even scratch you."

The man spoke in a relaxed voice. His voice sounded innocent without a shred of tension.

Kojou kept his center of gravity low as he glared back at the man.

The man's frivolous behavior concealed the vast power behind it. That's what Kojou's flesh instinctively told him, putting him on his guard. The flaming serpent was but a portion of his power. If he'd unleashed his Beast Vassal in earnest, even Regulus Aurum might not have been able to stop it…

Thinking that with a shudder, Kojou stared as the other man approached.

But the man's subsequent behavior caught Kojou by surprise.

He lowered himself to one knee before Kojou, bowing as a reverent noble.

"I apologize from the bottom of my heart for behaving rudely in testing your strength. My name is Dimitrie Vattler, he who has been granted the title of Duke of Ardeal by our primogenitor, the Lost Warlord. I am extremely delighted that you have come to visit this evening…"

Kojou was completely thrown off by the man's exceedingly eloquent manner of speech.

Yukina, with her silver spear poised, and even Sayaka, were dumbfounded as they stood in place.

"So you're Dimitrie Vattler…? The guy who called me over here?" Kojou asked in a halting voice.

Vattler raised his face in a broad grin. It was an affable smile broadcasting slyness and mischief in equal measure.

"Perhaps I should say, it is a pleasure to meet you, Kojou Akatsuki. Or rather…'Kaleid Blood,' the Fourth Primogenitor, my beloved!"

As Vattler spoke, he gave Kojou an affectionate, longing look. He opened both arms wide as if welcoming Kojou. "So it's like this after all," went Sayaka with a shake of her head. Yukina was beside herself.

"…Huh?"

Unable to comprehend the meaning of the words directed at him, Kojou let out a frail murmur. In one sense, Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor, meeting Dimitrie Vattler, Duke of Ardeal, was a fateful encounter indeed.

11

“Eh? And then you just ran away?”

She heard the exasperated voice of her childhood friend over the phone.

Asagi, who’d been lying down on her bed, was somewhat peeved as she vigorously sprung up. The time was just before midnight. She was in familiar surroundings at her residence. She was dressed in a tank top and underwear, not a look she really wanted others to be seeing. She’d wrapped her hair, still damp from getting out of the bath, with a bath towel.

“I-it’s not like I ran away. It was so stupid, it just pissed me off a little so I couldn’t stay there anymore.”

The other party to the long phone call was Motoki Yaze. Though there were no intimate feelings between them, he was a precious friend she could have pleasant, frank conversations with thanks to having known each other for so long. She’d meant to air her complaints about the sports festival incident, but at some point, it’d somehow changed to complaining about Kojou personally.

“Certainly I never expected a middle school transfer girl to go on the attack with a cheerleading outfit. You had a tennis skirt on, though, so you should’ve been equally matched. And you should’ve had even more of the element of surprise than she did.”

“Equally matched…what are you talking about?” Asagi asked in irritation at Yaze’s teasing-like tone of voice.

Yaze said, “How to put this?” thinking a little. “A no-holds-barred fight between two girls about who owns Kojou?”

“It is not!! Whoever goes out with Kojou has n-nothing to do with me.”

“Doesn’t look like it to me.”

Yaze spoke in an oddly serious voice.

“Oh, shut your trap,” Asagi said in a low voice.

“What I don’t like is how the idiot’s sneaking around hiding something. If he’s dating that Himeragi girl, he should just do it out in the open. How he’s keeping

secrets even from us is really annoying me. It's really fishy."

Asagi sought Yaze's agreeing as a matter of course, but Yaze replied with unexpected words.

"That's if they're really dating, ain't it?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, Kojou seriously thinks of you as just a friend, so there's no reason for him to keep dating li'l Himeragi a secret from you."

Asagi reluctantly agreed with Yaze's surprisingly logical statement.

"Mmm…yeah. You'd think he'd be bragging about it."

"Having said that, I don't think he's got the balls to go two-timing girls."

"Ah…no. Definitely not."

This time Asagi immediately concurred.

"For sure," Yaze went, proudly continuing. "So yeah, Kojou doesn't have any reason to hide dating li'l Himeragi from us. But all the same, he's been sneaking around with li'l Himeragi with a guilty look on his face…"

"Yeah."

"There's only one possibility I can think of, then."

"…What?"

"That transfer student's got something on Kojou, I'm sure of it."

"H-huh? Something on him?"

Asagi was taken aback for a while at Yaze's off-the-wall suggestion. But Yaze spoke in a very serious tone of voice.

"Well…something like an embarrassing secret she's threatenin' to expose… Anything come to mind like that?"

"Come to mention it…his behavior when he's with that transfer student is definitely not natural."

Asagi groaned as she recalled Kojou's behavior of late. They were unpleasant memories all, but she could accept that behavior as the result of Yukina

Himeragi's intimidation. Come to think of it, Yukina had said something herself.

That she was Kojou's watcher or something…

"Yeah. Y'see?"

On the other side of the phone call, Yaze raised his voice in apparent triumph, really annoying Asagi in the process.

"So what should I *do* about it?"

"Hmm…how about you throw a wrench in her plans by seducing Kojou?"

"Huh?! Why do I have to s-seduce…?!" Asagi yelled back in panic at the line, irresponsible even by Yaze's standards. But even now Yaze spoke with a serious tone of voice.

"Now, now, the sexy approach is one of your intel-gathering basics. Y'know, honey traps."

"Motoki…you're having a really good time with this, aren't you?"

"Oh no, what are you saying. I'm thinkin' serious for once for the sake of my childhood friend. I wanna help Kojou as a friend, too, seeing he's all worried and can't talk to anyone 'bout this."

"R-right…as a friend. Friends through and through."

Though well aware that Yaze was up to no-good scheming, Asagi had a hard time disputing his logic when he put it like that. But even if she did try the sexy approach, she was at a loss how she should go about it given her and Kojou's relationship. If it was that easy to rope in that blockhead, Asagi wouldn't have had this much trouble to begin with.

"Well, it's time for me to call Hiina. We'll talk about this another time."

Suddenly interjecting, Yaze cut the call short from his end. Hiina was the name of the older girlfriend Yaze had met on summer vacation and was currently dating.

"Wai—I wasn't finished tal—Is that how you behave toward your precious childhood friend?!"

In spite of Asagi's vehement objections, the call was already over. Asagi

crudely discarded her cell phone, tossing it onto the bed.

“Geez, if it’s not one thing, it’s another…”

Grumbling to herself, she sat in front of her desk. Western clothes poured out of her closet.

There were magazines, cosmetics, and stuffed animals here and there. Asagi’s home was a very girlie room.

But the corner around the desk was the sole exception. A spartan office-use monitor was connected to a rack-mounted, parallel PC cluster. The computer was on par with those used at IT corporations or university lab rooms, but here it rested on a simple study desk. It was something of a surreal scene.

Though none but her closest friends knew, Asagi was a highly gifted computer programmer. Of course, she didn’t call herself this, but the world of hackers had granted her the embarrassing nickname of “Cyber Empress.” She put her personal hobby to good use doing part-time, high-paying work for enterprises on Itogami Island and the Artificial Island Management Corporation.

That said, she didn’t feel much like working today. Thinking she might complain to Rin Tsukishima, too, if she was still awake, Asagi checked her messages and noticed the existence of an unfamiliar e-mail.

The sender’s address was from the Kano Alchemical Industries Corporation. It was a large-scale enterprise that had contracted Asagi to do work numerous times before.

But this wasn’t a request to do a paying job. The message contained only a pair of words.

“Requesting Decipher…”

“What’s this? Doesn’t feel like a virus e-mail, but…”

As Asagi inclined her head, she opened the attached data.

An assortment of bizarre characters of unknown origin was displayed before her. The system was exceedingly complex, the arrangement completely bonkers. It differed from any language known to exist among the peoples of Earth. But it differed from the spells used in sorcery and ritualism. No doubt any linguist, or

even teams of magic users, would find this difficult to decipher. But…

“A puzzle? You have a lot of guts to be challenging *me*.”

Asagi chuckled amusedly, repositioning herself before the monitor.

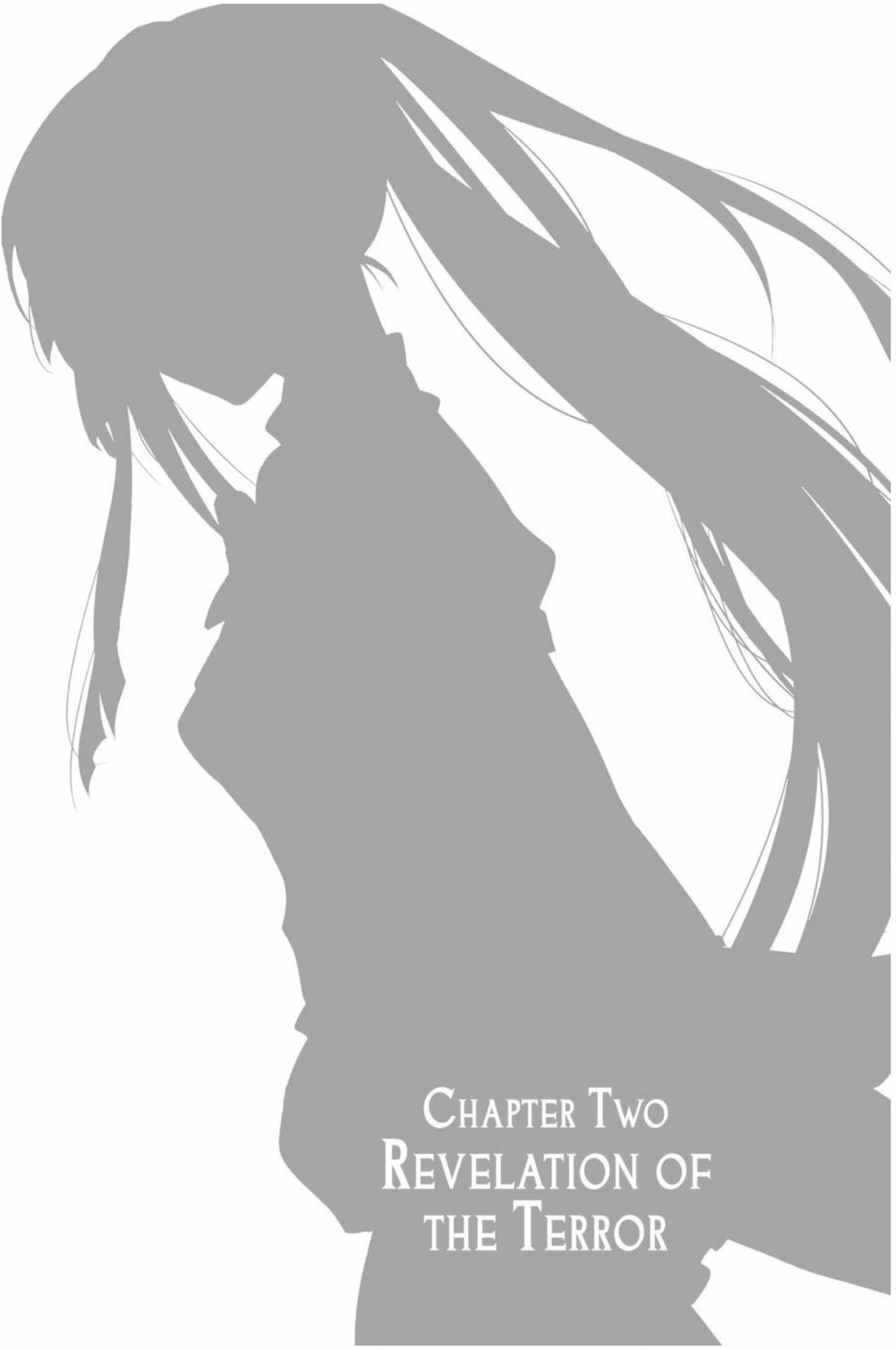
Her hacker instincts told her that these were not characters that existed for the sake of men. That’s why they couldn’t be deciphered by any ordinary linguistic approach.

This was a language written for something that was not human. It *was* a program…command codes for controlling something with special architecture unknown to modern man.

Asagi immersed herself in deciphering the characters; in part, it was out of spite and to escape the realities of real life, and also, because she’d been stimulated out of pure intellectual curiosity. The dismantled, bizarre characters formed a translated word on-screen.

“Nalakuvera…?” Asagi muttered brusquely as she gazed at the single word that came over the monitor’s surface.

In the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City, the night wore on…



Chapter Two
Revelation of the Terror

CHAPTER TWO

REVELATION OF THE TERROR

1

It was a room in an apartment building overlooking the sea. Bathed by the rays of the morning sun leaking in from the window, Kojou Akatsuki awoke.

“Kojou! C’mon, Kojou!”

The voice that had awakened him was Nagisa’s, ringing in his ears with 50 percent more shrillness than usual.

Having long changed into her school uniform, she wrenched open the curtains of Kojou’s room, stripping away the towel blanket under which he tried to escape from direct sunlight.

“It’s morning. Wake up. You’re gonna be late. What’ll you do about breakfast? Aaah, you turned off your alarm clock again, didn’t you?! Did you get your textbooks in order? Your homework? And your clothes are all over the pla— Wait, what’s this?! Why is this tuxedo all burnt?!”

“Sorry, Nagisa…can you lemme sleep thirty more seconds?”

Kojou made a vague moan in a broken voice as he buried his face into his pillow.

By the time Kojou and Yukina had finished their meeting with Dimitrie Vattler and gotten home, it was past three in the morning. Of course, he was short on sleep. The charred tuxedo was naturally the fault of Vattler’s attack; that had only added to his fatigue.

“You said that just earlier, Kojou! Geez, it’s not my fault if you really are late!”

He felt Nagisa leave the room, sighing in apparent resignation.

Covering his face with the towel blanket he'd recovered, Kojou made a sigh of relief. As he heard his little sister's footsteps grow more distant, Kojou's sleepy head recalled the details of their conversation with Vattler the night before.

"…That aura just now, Regulus Aurum, eh…? How unexpected. It seems coming to confirm the rumors of an ordinary human having consumed the Fourth Primogenitor was very much worth my time."

So spoke the aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire, completely lacking any concern despite having suddenly attacked Kojou.

The upper deck of the cruise ship *Oceanus Grave* was huge. As the night breeze made the edges of his coat flap around, a look of pleasure came over his face.

"…You know about Regulus Aurum…?"

With a bewildered look, Kojou glared at Vattler's innocently smiling face.

Though he looked like a young man in his twenties, he was an Old Guard vampire through and through, a monster who had lived many times longer than he appeared to be. Of course, he possessed a far greater amount of memories than Kojou. Vattler had to know a great deal of things Kojou did not. And it was likely that knowledge concerning the Fourth Primogenitor, in other words, Kojou himself, was no exception.

"It's the fifth Beast Vassal of Avrora Florestina, the Kaleid Blood, yes? I'd heard it is quite wild and difficult to control, but you've tamed it rather nicely. The spirit medium's blood must have been very nice, indeed."

Kojou wordlessly scowled his face at Vattler's casually delivered words. "Kaleid Blood," Avrora Florestina…the ring of those words unsettled Kojou's psyche, bringing a headache that was difficult to endure.

Though he must have met her sometime in the past, Kojou could not recall even a shred of it. Kojou's memory had been stolen, as if sealed by a powerful curse.

"What relation did you…have with Avrora?" Kojou asked while he endured the

fierce headache with no apparent cause.

Behaving like an actor onstage, Vattler put his palm to his own chest, a yearning in his narrowed eyes.

“Did I not say that at the start? I love her. I swore my eternal love to her.”

“Swore love…? Aren’t you part of the First Primogenitor’s clan?”

“Well, yes. But our primogenitor is not the sort who cares much about that kind of thing, you see.”

As Vattler spoke, his grin exposed his white canine teeth.

“If the ‘blood’ is strong, it’s all good. Strong blood families survive, regardless of who their ancestors were. Is that not how it is with vampires? So, shall we speak fondly of love, Kojou Akatsuki?”

“Wait, wait, wait, why is it like that?!”

Kojou hurried to fend off the approaching Vattler.

“Mm?”

“Isn’t Avrora the one you swore your love to?!”

“But she no longer exists. You consumed her, did you not?”

Kojou swallowed his breath with an “urk” at Vattler’s casually tossed words.

Kojou had no memory of that night. He couldn’t remember what happened. But Kojou, who had been a normal human being until but a few short months prior, had gained the power of the vampire known as the Fourth Primogenitor right around then.

The only thinkable possibility was that Kojou had *consumed the primogenitor*, merging with and consuming the preceding Fourth Primogenitor, seizing her abilities and very being.

For Kojou, a supposed mere human, to consume a vampire…he imagined it must have made an abominable sight.

However, there was nothing in Vattler’s tone of voice that suggested he was scolding Kojou.

Indeed, his smiling face seemed to be praising Kojou when he licked the corner of his upturned lips.

“…However, I dedicate my love for her to you, the inheritor of her ‘blood.’ Having sworn my eternal love to her, my conduct is very natural, is it not?”

“I’m tellin’ you that logic’s all messed up! So, what, anything goes if it’s the same bloodline?!”

“But of course. That you inherited the power of the Fourth Primogenitor means that she accepted you. Compared to that, the two of us being men is but a small, trifling thing.”

“It is *not* trifling. It’s a *big* problem! And would you stop using your tongue like that?!”

Kojou yelled at the young aristocrat’s provocatively flicking his tongue.

Then, pushing the thin-tempered Kojou back, Yukina stepped in front of him, instrument case in hand.

“Duke Ardeal…there is something I must ask you.”

A mystified look came over Vattler at the unexpected and unbidden intrusion. It seemed he had not taken more note of Yukina’s existence than that of a pebble until now.

“And you are?”

“I am called Yukina Himeragi, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. I have come tonight as watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Hmm…I see. Miss Sayaka’s colleague, then?”

Vattler looked down at Yukina, murmuring at her formally identifying herself.

“Incidentally, Kojou’s body carries the same scent as your blood… Were you the spirit medium for Regulus Aurum by any chance?”

“…?!”

Yukina’s entire body awkwardly stiffened at Vattler unexpectedly hitting the mark.

Kojou’s expression froze solid as well. Kojou had inherited twelve Beast Vassals

from the previous Fourth Primogenitor. However, they had not recognized Kojou as their master, making them uncontrollable, a dangerous situation that continued even now.

Among them, Regulus Aurum was the only one he had managed to tame. At the end of many twists and turns, Kojou had finally managed to bring one Beast Vassal under his control through sucking Yukina's blood.

Of course, they had not been so careless as to speak of the fact he'd sucked on the blood of the girl watching over him to others, but…

"You mean…you can tell even that from the smell of blood…?!"

Kojou was heavily taken aback as he responded with his question. He felt a penetrating gaze from behind. He knew the source without even bothering to look back. It was Sayaka Kirasaka, glaring at Kojou with hate-filled eyes.

A chill ran up Kojou's spine at the pure bloodlust levied at him. Sayaka had called herself a specialist in curses and assassination. Certainly, that level of bloodlust was more than sufficient to put a killing curse on a person or two.

"No, I lied. I just wanted to say it."

Vattler's smiling face looked quite satisfied, as if he was quite pleased at rocking Kojou and Yukina onto their heels.

"But well, you see, if you are indeed a candidate for being Kojou's 'blood companion,' that makes you my rival in love. As a show of respect, I shall make an exception and answer your question. What do you wish to ask?"

"There's a lot wrong with that preamble. She's no candidate or your love rival!"

Though Kojou refuted him in earnest, Vattler let the words slide past him as if not listening whatsoever.

Yukina made a heavy exhale, a sharp look on her face as she gazed directly at Vattler.

"Please share with us your reason for visiting Itogami Island. Or is it your objective to establish an unseemly relationship with the Fourth Primogenitor?"

Even Yukina's provocative manner of speech did not cause Vattler's smiling

facade to crumble. Indeed, his brows rose in apparent pleasure.

“Of course, that is very much my objective. Ah, but I am remiss, there was another matter as well.”

“So you did come for that!” Kojou muttered in annoyance. Yukina, shrouded in a hostile aura, glared at Vattler as if trying to intimidate him.

“And this other matter is…?”

“I had to make somewhat proper arrangements. I thought, if this Demon Sanctuary is indeed the territory of the Fourth Primogenitor, I must first make a proper greeting. After all, this might be somewhat troublesome for you.”

As Vattler spoke, he gracefully snapped his fingers. On that signal, a horde of servants emerged from the ship interior one after the other. The food wagon they hauled in was filled to the brim with various dishes. There had been food brought into the assembly hall for the party, but it felt shabby compared to the exquisite cuisine here.

“…What do you mean by ‘troublesome’?” Yukina asked without even glancing at the food that had been brought out.

Vattler, engaging in bad manners by picking up a slice of raw ham with his fingers, made a smile.

“Do you know of the name Kristof Gardos, Kojou?”

“No, who’s that?”

As Kojou shook his head, a man who seemed like Vattler’s butler handed a wineglass over to him. Since Kojou was underage, he began to refuse, but gave in upon seeing the man’s face. Though his demeanor was calm and intellectual, he was an aging man with a stern face that bore an incredibly overpowering aura. There was a large, old scar on one cheek, making one think he’d lived a rough life.

Vattler similarly accepted a glass from the butler, raising it to Kojou as he declared a toast. Kojou had to reluctantly admit it was picture-perfect.

“He is a former soldier native to the Warlord’s Empire, his name known briefly in Europe as a terrorist. As a leader of a group of radicals known as the Black

Death Emperor Front, he was responsible for the takeover of the National Assembly in Prague some ten years ago, resulting in over four hundred deaths."

"I've heard of the Black Death Emperor Front. But weren't they wiped out years ago? I'm sure their leader was assassinated…," Kojou murmured as he vaguely recalled an old news story. Kojou remembered it from back in his primary school days, so it had to have been a pretty big incident.

"Yes. I killed him. Though he was an elderly beast man with a somewhat troublesome special ability."

As Vattler tilted his wineglass, he answered with a casual smile. Kojou silently stared at the young aristocrat before his eyes. In spite of his current frivolous behavior, he felt keenly that this was an important figure in the world at large.

"Gardos is a survivor of the Black Death Emperor Front. Or, to be more accurate, Gardos serves as the new leader for the remnants of the Black Death Emperor Front. He has an illustrious career as a terrorist, after all."

"Wait a sec. You mean your reason for coming to Itogami Island is related to this Gardos guy?" Kojou asked as he suddenly felt a bad premonition. Vattler made what seemed like a nod of admiration.

"Your quick wits make this easy, Kojou. Precisely. It has been reported to me that Gardos, and his Black Death Emperor Front subordinates along with him, have infiltrated this island."

"…What would European radicals come all the way to this island for?"

"Who knows…? They surely have something in mind."

Kojou grated his teeth at the young aristocrat's feigning ignorance. Having silently watched until now, Sayaka suddenly spoke to Kojou in a businesslike tone.

"The Black Death Emperor Front is a beast man–supremacist group. Their objectives are the complete rupture of the Holy Ground Treaty and striking down the First Primogenitor who rules the Warlord's Empire…"

Without thinking, Kojou made a peevish look at Sayaka's cold attitude, which seemed to be saying, *You didn't even know that?*

“That’s got even less to do with this island.”

“No, senpai. That is incorrect.” Yukina rebuked Kojou in a small voice.

“Quite so,” said Vattler, making a mischievous wink.“Itogami Island is a Demon Sanctuary…a city established according to the Holy Ground Treaty. To them, that is cause enough to create an incident here. The Black Death Emperor Front does pride itself on its symbolism.”

“Wha… What kind of one-sided logic is that?” Kojou said with a low groan.

“Having said that, Japan is not the only nation with a Demon Sanctuary. It’s natural to presume that they have some other reason to come to Itogami Island in particular.”

“Some other reason…like what?”

“That I do not know.”

Vattler made a careless shake of his head. His voice was oddly buoyant.

“If I was to venture a guess, hmm, they might be searching for a way to defeat a primogenitor, as killing the First Primogenitor is their final objective.”

“…And what, you’re fine with that?”

Kojou made a sigh with a dumbfounded look.

Primogenitors were the oldest, most powerful of all vampires. If the Black Death Emperor Front obtained the power to defeat that primogenitor, it meant they posed a threat to the existence of all other vampires as well. Vattler should have been in as much danger as anyone. But…

“I don’t really mind… Well, that’s what the old man would say. In light of various circumstances that concern me, I can say no differently.”

Opening his arms wide as if it was someone else’s problem, Vattler let out a laugh rich in meaning.

Yukina glared at the mysterious, young aristocrat with a very serious look on her face.

“Do you intend to assassinate Kristof Gardos?”

“Not at all. I intend nothing that is so troublesome. In the first place, my Beast

Vassals are not oriented toward such delicate work. Their specialty is more along the lines of burning cities to the ground."

Vattler slipped away from Yukina's cross-examination like an eel. "Proud of it, huh?" Kojou muttered with a quiet sigh. However, it was the blunt truth that vampire Beast Vassals weren't oriented toward precision attacks. If Vattler wasn't minded to do battle with the terrorists, that was a relief…but the moment Kojou allowed himself a sense of relief…

"But you know, if Gardos's side should come to try and kill me, I will be forced to engage them. I would be exercising self-defense. Isn't that so?"

As if sneering at Kojou for lowering his guard, Vattler spoke, seeking his agreement. That was when Kojou, too, finally realized what he was up to.

Vattler, who had slain the leader of the group of radicals known as the Black Death Emperor Front, was a target for their revenge, so to speak. Surely the remnants of the Black Death Emperor Front were awaiting their opportunity to take revenge upon him even now.

If Gardos did truly obtain the power to slay a primogenitor, he'd go straight for Vattler. Vattler, too, sought this.

"So you came to Itogami Island to taunt the terrorists to draw them out, huh? Coming aboard this ridiculously conspicious ship too…"

"No, no…my primary objective was to meet you, my beloved." As Vattler spoke those words, he turned an insistent look upon Kojou.

Kojou's voice grew ragged. "Like this is the time to kid around. If you wanna wage war, do it in your own country. Don't bring trouble to other people's cities!"

"Of course, I wish such trouble may be avoided. Should the Counter-Demon Agents of this city capture Gardos, I have no complaint. It would be nice if I was saved the trouble. That, of course, is *if* they can catch him."

With a small shake of his head and a shrug of his shoulders, Vattler made an exaggerated sigh.

Then, he turned a handsome, smiling face toward Kojou that made him shiver.

“But the nine Beast Vassals that obey me… Should danger befall me, their master, who knows what they might do? Sinking this island is no great concern to them. That is why I thought I should apologize to you…in advance.”

“Wha…?!”

This time, it was Kojou who exclaimed.

Vattler had just made clear he was fine with sinking Itogami Island. Should mere dozens of terrorists come after his life, he’d destroy the island and everyone on it.

And he made this declaration right in front of Kojou. This doubled as his declaration that Kojou could do nothing to stop him. If Kojou got in his way, he’d take Kojou down, too…

These, hidden behind his frivolous, superficial words, were the true feelings of Dimitrie Vattler.

It wasn’t that it didn’t piss him off. But in truth, Kojou didn’t have any way to stop Vattler.

For even should Kojou attempt to stop Vattler by force, the resulting fight between them would do immense damage to Itogami Island by itself.

So long as Vattler claimed legitimate self-defense, neither Yukina, nor Sayaka, nor the Lion King Agency could raise a hand to stop him. The mere fact that terrorists were after the life of Vattler, an official foreign emissary, was insufficient cause to expel him from Itogami Island.

With the situation providing no escape hatch, Kojou began to sink into despair when…

“If I may say so, you need not be so concerned, Duke Ardeal.”

It was Yukina who offered her opinion in a clear, chilly voice.

“H-Himeragi?”

“…What could you mean, I wonder? Surely you do not suggest Kojou might take care of Gardos in my place? I think even my Beast Vassals are better behaved than the Fourth Primogenitor’s…”

Both Kojou and Vattler had surprised looks as they asked their questions in reply.

A look of quiet determination came over Yukina's graceful features as she nodded.

"I suppose so. Therefore, I will apprehend the Black Death Emperor Front remnants in the Fourth Primogenitor's place."

"…Yukina?!" Sayaka shrieked. As talented as she was, when Yukina was concerned, her reserve seemed to fly out the window. But Kojou understood why she was nervous all too well.

"Why does it have to be like that?! Taking on this Gardos guy in my place or whatever…"

"Please be quiet, both of you. As a watcher, it is the obvious conclusion. I cannot permit the Fourth Primogenitor to come in contact with terrorists, after all, particularly since they seek to kill primogenitors."

Yukina spoke in a hard, flat voice. To an impartial observer, she would appear levelheaded, but this was the look she always gave off when digging in her heels. Having such a serious personality, she was quite obstinate once she set her mind on something.

Also, Vattler looked over Yukina as if somehow wary of her.

"Hmm…I see. Interesting…perhaps I should say, as expected by my rival in love?"

"Eh? No, it's nothing like that at…"

Yukina's stiff expression softened as she let out a perplexed-sounding voice.

But the young aristocrat seemed to take pleasure in it as he made what somehow seemed to be a cruel laugh as he made his declaration.

"Very well, let us first see the might of the Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. Show me whether you are worthy of being Kojou's companion."

"That ain't for you to decide dammit," muttered Kojou, but Yukina and Vattler completely ignored him as they glared at each other.

Glancing to the side, he saw Sayaka was in a light daze, still frozen in shock. Apparently Yukina telling her to be quiet had delivered quite a shock to her.

Yukina made a quiet nod toward the young aristocrat making a taunting smile at her.

Those were the circumstances of that night's rendezvous with Vattler. Upon that note ended Kojou and Yukina's late-night meeting with the envoy from the First Primogenitor.

And then…

"Kojou! Oh, Kojou!"

Suddenly hearing a voice right at his ear, Kojou's eyes twitched in surprise.

It was certainly not a disagreeable voice. Indeed, it had an intimate ring to his ear. But he still had a very bad feeling about this. Why was he hearing *her* voice here…?

"How long are you gonna sleep for? Hey, if you don't wake up soon, you're gonna be late."

With his body violently shaken, Kojou slowly opened his eyelids.

Perhaps his mind still being foggy was because he'd had a long dream. It didn't really register that there was a girl in his field of vision. Her hair was nicely done up; her eyelashes were very shapely. She had a surprisingly nicely made-up and elegant face. It was the warmth of her soft body and the scent of soap that made Kojou wake with a start.

"A-Asagi?"

"Good morning, Kojou. You're late."

It was morning in the Akatsuki residence in his own very familiar room. Looking down upon the freshly woken Kojou, Asagi Aiba smiled.

2

It was said that a surprise came from the degree of difference between an unexpected event and normalcy, but when the difference was too great, one

was all the calmer because the situation was simply too absurd.

As surprises went, having a girl from his class show up on top of his own bed was far more shocking to him than any meeting with a larger-than-life aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire.

Mounted atop the thoroughly dumbfounded Kojou, Asagi flicked the tip of Kojou's nose.

"Why, Kojou, you… If you keep sleeping like that, I'm gonna play pranks on you!"

"…What are you doing? Did you eat something weird…?" Kojou moaned out as her all-too-cute conduct felt all the more ominous for it.

Based on facial looks alone, Asagi could only be classified as a straight-up beauty, but she wasn't the type to be courteous to boys, whether by accident or design. She was moody, paid no attention to the opposite sex, and demanded no special concern in return. If Kojou had to describe her, he'd have to categorize her as closest to "one of the guys." Though it'd be awkward to say it out loud, Kojou considered that one of her selling points. Having someone like that suddenly act all cute toward him only made him wary.

Asagi herself seemed to realize that it was indeed hopeless, returning to her usual cynical tone of voice.

"I did not. Guys like this kind of thing… Er…that's what they say on the Net and stuff."

"I'm not really sure, but I think there's probably a few flaws in that info."

"Ah…you think so, too? It seemed a little odd to me."

"Geez," Asagi went, looking at the ceiling, sighing as if finding it all troublesome.

Looking at her behavior, Kojou was now sure of it. Asagi had invaded Kojou's bed with some other objective in mind. No doubt that objective was nothing good…

"By the way, could you move already? You're heavy."

"You sure don't mind saying rude things loud and clear, do you? I was moving

whether you said it or… Er, what's this, it's hard…?"

With a small sound of effort, Asagi, sitting astride Kojou, who was lying faceup, moved to get off the bed when she inclined her head as she casually touched something unfamiliar near Kojou's lower abdomen. Asagi's slender hand had gripped with ease a part of his flesh that became lively as a normal physiological reaction in the morning.

"K-K-K-K-Kojou!"

Realizing the true nature of what she was touching, Asagi let out a yell mixed with a shriek.

Asagi, who had sisters but no brothers, had an unwitting fear of *that*. Kojou felt slighted as she leaped off the bed.

"What're you getting mad at me for?! You're the one who decided to crawl all over me!"

"Oh God…how could you make me touch it. That hard fleshy feeling…ughh, gross!"

"Well, don't blame me!!"

Hurt by Asagi's reaction, Kojou objected as well. As he tried to calm the worked-up girl down, they both ended up flopping onto the bed together.

"…Asagi, sorry for pushing this on you. I have to go to cheerleading club, but did you manage to wake up Kojou?"

At that moment, Nagisa roughly opened the door, barging in with a rapid patter. Her smiling face froze stiff when she saw Kojou and Asagi entwined on top of the bed.

Kojou and Asagi, too, froze in their current entangled position. A stifling silence came over the middle of the room.

"…What are you two doing?"

It was Nagisa's dignified question that broke the silence.

"N-Nagisa?! I see, you're the one who let Asagi into the house on your own…!"

Kojou somehow or other grasped the situation. Taking a moment to think, of

course that was it.

Even Asagi wouldn't be audacious enough to enter Kojou's private room on her own. Not unless there was someone who'd invited her into the house.

But her coconspirator, Nagisa, had surely not imagined that Kojou and Asagi would engage in behavior quite like this.

"I don't remember asking her to get in bed with you, though. What part did Asagi grab, Kojou…!"

"What, this is my fault…?!"

Taking the blame for a clear act of God, Kojou felt like crying. And, as if to kick him while he was down, from behind Nagisa's ferocious visage, a small silhouette unexpectedly poked its face in.

"…Senpai? What are you doing?"

"Ah, don't! If you look at these impure people, it'll stain you, too, Yukina!"

"…Eh?"

The moment Yukina peered into the room, eyes blinking with a puzzled look, her eyes instantly lost all emotion. Both of their faces, side by side, had doll-like, expressionless eyes, instilling all the more terror for it.

"Wait a minute! Why's Himeragi in the house, too…!"

"It's because you were bad for sleeping so long! I couldn't make her wait in the heat outside so I thought I'd let her in so she could be cooler!"

Kojou was silent as she made her rapid-fire rant.

So that was it. It wasn't that Nagisa was trying to ensnare Kojou out of malice, apparently.

But what was the atmosphere enveloping Kojou's room, then, that made him want to flee?

Asagi, who remained in what looked like a partially pinned-down position, put the ready-to-run Kojou in a headlock, as she shot Yukina a defiant look. In contrast, Yukina's expression was unreadable.

"I'm sorry, Yukina… Are you…upset?"

“No, not particularly.”

The Lion King Agency’s Sword Shaman replied to Nagisa’s nervous, concerned-sounding question with a gentle shake of her head.

Then, Yukina nodded to Kojou and Asagi as if nothing at all had happened.

“I believe I will wait outside after all. Senpais, please take your time.”

She slowly departed the room, leaving those words behind her. Her attitude was absolutely cool and ordinary.

But about thirty seconds after Kojou sensed the entryway door being closed…

He heard a thunderclap-like *thud* sound that made the entire building tremble.

It was like the impact of a karate master slamming his foot into the wall before him out of pique. Kojou trembled from the nonsensical chilly sensation he felt run down his spine.

Asagi looked between Kojou’s reaction and the direction Yukina had departed in with deep interest.

“I wonder if that’s jealousy talking?”

“Not likely. It’s not like we’re dating or anything.” Kojou replied without any particularly deep thought. For some reason, Asagi’s eyes were wide as she looked at Kojou.

“…Right. It’s not like you’re dating or anything.”

After that murmur, seemingly storing the thought in her memory, Asagi pointed in the direction Yukina had left in as she asked. “What kind of girl is she, anyway?”

“What kind? She’s what she looks like. She’s not a bad person. She can be trouble sometimes, though.”

Kojou made a light sigh as memories concerning his being watched passed before his eyes.

“Kojou, does that girl have something on you?”

“S-something on me?”

“Yeah, a secret you can’t tell anyone else.”

Asagi crept closer to Kojou’s face as she asked.

“N-no…i-it’s nothing like…that.”

Kojou subconsciously averted his eyes from Asagi as sweat dampened his back.

Now that she mentioned it, way too much came to mind: His being the vampire called the Fourth Primogenitor, those abilities scorching the city but a short time ago, the millions of yen worth of damage caused, the fact he’d sucked her blood—he had the feeling Yukina held any number of secrets that could completely mess up his life.

“Hmmm. I see…even Motoki’s on the money sometimes.”

Watching Kojou’s suspicious behavior, Asagi made a satisfied nod.

“Yaze? He said something to you?”

Kojou bounced the question back to her with fierce unease. Apparently that guy had put Asagi up to all her eccentric behavior that morning. But regardless…

“Sorry, but I really do have to go.”

Asagi, speaking with a strangely bright smile on her face, trampled over Kojou and hopped off the bed.

“Make sure you get to school on time, too. Nagisa, let’s go to school together!”

“H-hey, Asagi?”

As Asagi warmly embraced the still somewhat astonished Nagisa’s shoulder, she went “See ya!” and waved to Kojou. Kojou scratched his disheveled hair as he watched the two leave the room.

“What’d you really come for, anyway…?”

Seemingly talking to himself out loud, Asagi turned back for a single moment and answered. “Mm…I wonder. A declaration of war…perhaps?”

Suddenly left by his lonesome, Kojou went, “What was that all about?” as he tilted his head.

By the window, a single bird had stopped, watching Kojou.

The bird, its dark gray feathers seemingly constructed out of metal, stared at Kojou amid the dazzling rays of the morning sun.

Meanwhile…

A lone teenage girl stood atop a building in Island South—Itogami Island's southern district.

She was a teenage girl with long hair. There was a large black instrument case lying at the girl's feet.

The girl's gaze was aimed at the ninth floor of an apartment building standing on the opposite shore, with a street interposed between them.

A single bird was stopped near the window of the room. The girl was borrowing the bird's eyes to look at what was happening within the building.

"How…how indecent…"

A low murmur escaped the girl's lips. The girl's white cheeks were tinged with a hint of red—perhaps out of anger she could not be hidden, perhaps from embarrassment.

"It seems that man indeed requires a suitable punishment…"

Her lightly chestnut-pigmented hair danced and fluttered in the strong breeze blowing in from the sea.

Leaning down, she retrived from her instrument case a single sword…

It was a two-handed, silver-colored sword with a smooth, curved metallic surface.

3

"Hey, Himeragi." Kojou called out to Yukina inside the monorail they used to commute to school.

Yukina, holding onto a metallic-colored handrail, slowly turned to look at Kojou. Her eyes, like deep lakes, had the cold light floating in them he'd seen

when they'd first met.

"What is it, Akatsuki-senpai, who made me wait outside while with a female classmate?" Yukina casually replied in a robotic voice. Kojou audibly cleared his throat.

"I can clearly hear the ill will in that clinical tone of voice, you know."

"I am sorry. Excuse me, Akatsuki-senpai, who gets along very well with female classmates in his bed in the morning."

"Gaaah! That's all Asagi deciding to climb into my bed while I was asleep! She's always playing pranks. It's probably 'cause she got annoyed yesterday," Kojou clamored as he clutched his own head with both hands. In his opinion, it was a very convincing theory. Holding a small grudge for skipping out on sports festival practice to be with Yukina was very plausible where Asagi was concerned.

"So Aiba did that all on her own…did she?"

Yukina let out an exhale that sounded like a sigh.

"I thought as much. Though I am not so sure it was a 'prank.'"

"Wha—You mean it wasn't just a misunderstanding?"

Kojou watched Yukina while breathing a sigh of relief now that she'd returned to her usual tone of voice. As he did so, she glared at him with narrowed eyes.

"No matter how indecent you might be, senpai, I at least trust that you are not a person who would immerse himself in unseemly conduct with Nagisa close by."

"So you're saying I'm indecent, anyway?"

Kojou curled his lips in dissatisfaction. But based on what he'd been told so far, even he was not too dense to pick it up: Yukina really wasn't angry with Kojou out of petty jealousy.

"So, if you know all that, why are you so angry?"

"Though I trust that Aiba's lewd behavior was not out of any purposeful behavior of yours, senpai, I do not think that means you could have resisted her seductions."

"Seductions?"

“What would you have done if you’d been assaulted by vampiric urges?”

Kojou’s breath instantly caught at Yukina’s serene question.

Yukina was firmly gripping the handle of the guitar case on her back as she silently stared at Kojou.

It was the abominable characteristic possessed by the vampire species. Rooted in the deepest recesses of their instincts rested a craving for blood, easily robbing a vampire of his reason and turning him into a violent monster.

It was a powerful urge even primogenitors could not control. And lust was what called it forth.

If, in that place, he’d been assaulted by vampiric urges, Kojou might well have assaulted Asagi. And then Nagisa would have seen his fangs sunk into Asagi’s neck. In a single moment, he might have hurt and lost his precious friend and his only little sister.

“…Suppose you’re right. Sorry,” Kojou murmured in a hushed voice. It burned him that he’d been so careless that Yukina had to point it out to him. One way or another, Yukina had been worried for Kojou. Of course she was angry.

“Please reflect so that you do not befall such a dangerous situation again.”

Yukina spoke in a tone like what one used to scold a puppy.

“Well, yeah, but,” said Kojou, his lips tapering in what seemed a bit of displeasure. “Er, but I think this morning really was an act of God…”

“No, I think it is best you be more resolute, senpai. Please consider this.”

“Er, but what should I do if someone decides on her own to come into my room while I’m asleep…?”

“I believe it is best you always remain on your guard so that does not occur. Please reflect.”

“Ah, come to think of it, if that’s why you were angry, why’d you leave, Himeragi? Wouldn’t it have been better to stay there, so you could stop me if…”

“Uunh…”

“…I’ll be careful in the future.”

As Yukina began making a low sound, Kojou bowed his head deeply.

“Goodness,” Yukina said, making an exhale that seemed full of exasperation.

“At any rate, if you suck on anyone’s blood beside mine, I will be truly angry, then.”

“R-right.”

It was like she was saying she was fine if it was her blood he was sucking on. As Kojou thought of that, he was deeply grateful for Yukina’s concern. By rights, Yukina was just a watcher: a Counter-Demon Attack Mage granted the authority to eliminate Kojou. Even so, she was looking out for him like this. Even if her lectures were ever so slightly irrational, that was no cause for him to complain.

“Anyway, Himeragi, what do you intend to do now?” Kojou asked, his expression turning rather serious.

“You mean searching for the Black Death Emperor Front?”

Perceptively, Yukina immediately bounced the question back. “Yeah,” said Kojou with a nod.

“It’s a different situation from before with that old man Eustach. Not really able to find terrorists without any leads, are you?”

“I suppose not. However, I meant to go speak to someone first, someone who should have information.”

“…What, you know an info broker?”

Sounds like somethin’ out of a police drama, Kojou thought, oddly interested.

But Yukina went, “Not at all,” shaking her head with a chiding look.

“However, Duke Ardeal said Itogami Island’s Counter-Demon Agents are trying to catch the Black Death Emperor Front, did he not?”

“Counter-Demon Agents?”

“Yes. Counter-Demon Agents.”

Yukina nodded as Kojou watched her. Kojou thought a little, murmured “ohh,” and clapped his hands together as if just remembering something.

4

Sakai Academy, high school building, staff section…

For some reason, Natsuki Minamiya's office, located on the top floor—even higher up than the principal's office—had an extravagant, commanding view.

The thick carpet was velvet. The furniture was all antiques. It had a bed with a canopy. The room had an elegance around it that made one want to ask what palace she'd robbed blind.

"Sorry, Natsuki. There's a little something I hoped you could help us with…"

Kojou opened the thick, wooden door and brusquely entered the room. And the next moment…

"Guoo?!"

Kojou's skull sustained a sudden impact, rolling him onto his back.

"S-senpai?!"

Yukina, entering immediately after Kojou, rushed to pull Kojou up as he groaned in pain.

From the center of the room, Natsuki Minamiya, wearing a black dress, stared coldly at both of them.

She was a small, baby-faced woman who looked like a little girl, but she was actually an English teacher who claimed to be twenty-six. She was also an actively serving National Counter-Demon Attack Mage. A set number of Counter-Demon Agents were tasked with the safety of the students in Itogami Island's educational facilities.

Natsuki was one of them.

Sitting very deeply in an expensive antique chair, she opened a folding fan with black frills.

"I told you to not call me *Natsuki*. Learn already, Kojou Akatsuki."

As she spoke, she shifted her glare to Yukina.

"Oh, you're here, too, middle school transfer student. So, what is your

question? Did you want to ask how to make babies?”

“E-excuse me?”

For a moment, Yukina was in mild shock, unable to comprehend the words spoken to her, after which Yukina quickly shook her head. Kojou, pressing a hand to his forehead, leaped up with great vigor.

“Like hell it is! What are you talkin’ about, out of the blue like that?!”

“…Ah, it’s not? What do you want then?”

Natsuki made a bored-seeming exhale. *Wonder how much she really wanted to talk about how to make babies,* Kojou thought as his shocked face turned serious.

“We’re looking for a man called Kristof Gardos. We’d like you to share any leads you have with us.”

That moment, Natsuki’s aura completely changed. Her small body, not even 150 centimeters in height, exuded an air of oppressiveness so thick, it was hard to breathe.

“Where did you hear that name?”

Natsuki asked, narrowing her eyes like a beautiful Western doll.

So she does know about him, thought Kojou. Regardless of her day job, Natsuki was apparently one of the top five Counter-Demon Agents on Itogami Island. Kojou and Yukina had expected that she’d be fully informed about the appearance of a big-time criminal of Gardos’s level.

“From Dimitrie Vattler. I’m sure you know him? Owns a big cruise ship docked at Itogami Island? He said he came from the Warlord’s Empire to wipe Gardos out.”

“Tch.” As Natsuki listened to Kojou’s explanation, she clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“I see…I should have expected that frivolous Master of Serpents might call you over. Really sticking his nose where it’s not wanted…”

Natsuki spoke ill of Vattler like she knew him personally. The “serpents” she

mentioned were no doubt Vattler's Beast Vassals. Though only for an instant, Kojou had seen that Beast Vassal enveloped in an incandescent light himself.

"So it's true that terrorists from the Warlord's Empire came to Itogami Island, huh?"

"If Vattler said it, it must be so."

Natsuki spoke in a careless tone. She'd judged it to be something she couldn't hide.

"And if I tell you where Gardos is, what then?"

"I will catch him before he makes contact with Duke Ardeal."

Yukina instantly replied to Natsuki's question. With that one statement, Natsuki apparently had a grasp of the broad circumstances. If he entered combat with the Black Death Emperor Front remnants, Vattler would happily release his own Beast Vassals. There was no mistaking that enormous damage to Itogami Island would result. Yukina was saying she'd put a stop to it.

But Natsuki's reply was quite blunt.

"Pointless. Give it up. Ah, Astarte…you don't need to serve these two; it's a waste of tea. Do bring me that new black tea, however."

"…Accept."

Natsuki rudely ordered around the girl wearing a maid outfit bringing in barley tea. Surprised at the somehow familiar echo of her voice, Kojou and Yukina both lifted their faces in shock.

Carrying a silver-colored tray, an indigo-haired girl stood before them.

Her facial features were artificially symmetrical, with expressionless, pale blue eyes. There was a highly exposing apron dress wrapped around her slender, immature body.

"You're the Beast Vassal host who was with old man Eustach…!"

"Astarte…?!"

"Ahh yes, come to think of it, she's a familiar face to you both."

Natsuki spoke without any change in her expression.

Kojou approached her while speaking in a small voice. “Why’s this girl here at school? Er, more than that, what’s with that outfit?!”

“Artificial Life-Form Astarte has been given three years’ probation for complicity in the raid on Keystone Gate.”

Finding the matter bothersome, Natsuki brushed Kojou off as she explained. “Being a national Counter-Demon Agent as well as a teacher, I am the logical choice to take custody of her. Besides, I was in the market for a loyal maid.”

“No doubt the reason you threw in at the end is the real one… Well, if she’s happy with it that’s great,” Kojou murmured as if he was telling that to himself.

The maid-clothed Astarte began preparing black tea just as Natsuki had commanded. The expression on her fairylike features did not change, but somehow, she looked like she felt it was well worth the effort.

Certainly, compared to when she’d been made to hunt demons in nothing but a cape coat, she might be quite a bit happier now.

“…Ms. Minamiya. What do you mean, saying it is pointless to capture Gardos?”

Yukina, finally recovered from surprise, appeared to finally remember to return to her topic.

“I did not say capturing him is pointless. I’m saying there’s no need for the two of you to do so.”

“Eh?”

“The Black Death Emperor Front can’t do anything regardless; at the very least, not against Vattler. Appearances aside, he’s the monster known as ‘the being closest to a primogenitor.’”

“But,” continued Yukina, clinging to her serious tone of voice. “I have heard the Black Death Emperor Front’s desire is to slay the First Primogenitor. Perhaps they have come to Itogami Island in search of the means to make that a reality.”

If the Black Death Emperor Front *did* obtain the power to kill the First Primogenitor, they would be able to kill Vattler—“the being closest to a primogenitor”—as well. But though she understood that, Natsuki made a

tedious tilt of her head.

“I suppose. That’s why it’s pointless. Gardos is after the Nalakuvera.”

“Nalakuvera…?”

Yukina raised her eyebrows at the unfamiliar word. Apparently the word wasn’t in even her vocabulary.

“A prehistoric artifact excavated from the Mehelgal Number Nine ruin in Southern Asia. It’s said to be a weapon of the gods that destroyed countless cities and cultures that once existed,” Natsuki explained in a perfunctory, teacher-like tone of voice. Kojou had a very bad feeling about all this.

“Weapon of the gods… Isn’t that a pretty dangerous thing? You’re not sayin’ there’s one of these on Itogami Island, are you?”

“Though of course this hasn’t been publicly disclosed, a company called Kano Alchemical apparently smuggled one sample from the ruins in past customs. Of course, the terrorists seized it a little while ago.”

“There is one?! And it’s been stolen?!”

“It’s a curio made over nine thousand years ago. What are you so nervous about?” Seeing Kojou all flustered, Natsuki spoke with apparent scorn. “I told you, what they stole was excavated from a ruin. It’s a piece of junk long past its expiry date. Even if they did get it to move, how would they control it?”

“…Perhaps the Black Death Emperor Front set eyes upon that ancient weapon because they knew of some way to control it?”

Yukina calmly pointed out one possibility. The corners of Natsuki’s mouth rose in mild pleasure.

“Hmph, you do have good instincts, transfer student. Certainly, a stone tablet with what appears to be a control spell for the Nalakuvera carved into it has been discovered recently.”

“If that’s so, then it really is possible they could use this weapon?”

“It’s a tough nut to crack that’s defeated linguistic experts and sorcerous agencies all over the world. A bunch of terrorists taking a crack at it won’t lead to very much.”

As Kojou tapered his lips in concern, Natsuki blithely dismissed him.

“We arrested a lab assistant who was helping with deciphering the stone tablet. It’s only a matter of time before the Black Death Emperor Front remnants are found. There’s not many places that internationally wanted infiltrators can hide with a stupidly large curio, after all. The Island Guard expects to round up Gardos any day now.”

“Round up…? Are you helping them out, too, Natsuki?”

Kojou’s face grimaced as he spoke. Having already captured a Gardos coconspirator, no doubt Natsuki was already deeply involved in the current incident. He didn’t think she was trying to warn Yukina off because she didn’t want her prey stolen from her, but…

“Don’t call me Natsuki! Anyway, whatever the Master of Serpents said, it’s not your turn onstage. If you must say anything, tell him to watch out for beast-men suicide bombers as the noose tightens.”

“Suicide bombers…!”

Kojou’s face paled at Natsuki’s casual warning. Certainly, it was one of the ways terrorists few in number might be able to inflict damage upon Vattler. The odds of residents of Itogami Island being caught in the blast were certainly not poor.

“I will give one other warning. Kojou Akatsuki, be wary of Dimitrie Vattler.” Natsuki murmured on the side as her black tea was brought to her. “To date, he has defeated two ‘Wisemen’ above his rank descended from the Second Primogenitor…and consumed them.”

“…He’s…consumed…fellow vampires?” Kojou exclaimed as he thought back to the young, sociable aristocrat. Unsurprisingly, shock came over Yukina as well.

“That’s the reason he’s called ‘the being closest to a primogenitor.’ At the very least, see that he does not consume *you*.”

Natsuki made an impetuous smile as she spoke. In spite of her nonchalant tone, it was a realistic possibility. Kojou could only nod in silence.

5

“I wonder if what Ms. Minamiya said is true?”

Having left Natsuki’s room, Kojou and Yukina headed to their own classroom, their footsteps heavy. Along the way, Yukina stopped and asked her question.

“Her personality might be warped in a few places, but I don’t think she’s a liar by nature.” Rubbing his head, which still hurt a little, Kojou voiced his thoughts out loud.

“Somehow I see what you mean,” Yukina said, a strained smile coming over her.

The Lion King Agency that Yukina was part of got along with Natsuki and other national Counter-Demon Agents quite poorly. Naturally, Yukina had considered the possibility Natsuki had provided Yukina with false intelligence, but those familiar with Natsuki’s personality wouldn’t think she’d do something that troublesome.

Fundamentally, lying was something done by the weak as a survival mechanism. Someone as powerful as Natsuki had no use for such a thing. If anyone pulled a fast one on her, she’d take her pound of flesh in retribution; if anyone opposed her, she’d pound them into dust whether friend or foe. That was Natsuki’s modus operandi, the source of her charisma. Though a mere human, she was a creature far closer to a primogenitor than someone like Kojou.

That was why her words could be trusted, even if the details were off the wall. That included the word that Vattler had consumed his brethren.

“You told me a Wiseman is a second-generation vampire, right?” Kojou checked with Yukina in an unsure tone of voice.

“Yes,” indicated Yukina, nodding with a firm look on her face.

“They are those chosen to receive the blood of the primogenitors. They are not limited to the biological sons and daughters of the primogenitors, however.”

“…So apostles and successors and stuff, huh?”

“They probably stole the idea from the apostles around that guy they called

the Son of God back in the day," Kojou muttered. The primogenitors directly received blood from what constituted "the oldest generation" of vampires. Of course, their abilities had to be far in excess of those of normal vampires.

"So by that definition, Vattler's not actually directly connected to the First Primogenitor?"

"I suppose not. They call him a pureblood noble, but in the end he's only a distant descendant of the Wisemen." As Yukina spoke, her expression became clouded. "However, if the Duke of Ardeal truly has consumed more than one Wiseman, he might well possess some kind of special ability. A special ability that can overturn an advantage in thickness of the blood…"

"Thickness of the blood…huh?" murmured Kojou, looking at his own palm.

To unaging vampires, blood was the source of their magical strength. It was their medium for summoning Beast Vassals as well as the foundation of their very existence. By sucking on the blood of many beings, long-lived vampires amassed even greater magical power within that blood. Old Guard vampires possessed greater power than younger generations for that very reason. That went double for the Wisemen.

But that didn't mean a younger vampire was unable to obtain great power sooner rather than later. He just had to rob magical power directly from the blood of more powerful vampires.

For vampires to consume the blood of other vampires, their very existence…it was, in a sense, cannibalism.

But it was said that one normally could not consume a vampire more powerful than oneself. Even if he sucked the other person's blood dry, it would take control of his own flesh and mind from within. The one attempting to consume would instead be consumed himself. That was the danger of cannibalism, and the primary reason younger generation vampires did not defeat their betters.

That was to say, normally, Vattler defeating a Wiseman simply wouldn't be possible.

"Oh yeah, he was pretty hung up on blood, wasn't he?"

Kojou spoke as he recalled Vattler's statement the night before. Yukina

prefaced her reply with, “It is not the Duke of Ardeal alone who is obsessed with bloodlines, but the vampire species as a whole.”

“Though certainly, he is somewhat unusually attached to you, senpai.”

“It ain’t me he’s attached to. It’s the Fourth Primogenitor’s blood he’s hung up on.”

Kojou looked like he was eating sand as he corrected her. Though he said he’d sworn his love to Avrora, he’d easily switched that over to Kojou upon learning he had inherited her blood.

Even for frivolous attitudes it was frivolous, but he was really saying just how much he was attached to the blood of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“If so, Ms. Minamiya’s advice to be careful you are not consumed by him might well be on the mark…”

Yukina looked up straight at Kojou as she spoke. Vattler had already consumed two Wisemen above his rank. Consequently, the possibility of him preying on even a primogenitor bearing far greater magical power could not be lightly dismissed.

“Suppose so,” Kojou said in a timid voice. “As I am now, I probably wouldn’t win if he seriously tried to kill me… It’d be a different story if I could control at least a few more Beast Vassals, though.”

“Beast Vassals, is it…?”

For some reason, there was a brooding look over Yukina’s face as she murmured.

Kojou only had one Beast Vassal he could manage to control. Though Regulus Aurum was a world-class Beast Vassal summoned with the Fourth Primogenitor’s magical power, it was still just one.

While using Regulus Aurum to attack, Kojou himself was helpless. There was no guarantee Regulus Aurum would win if facing Vattler’s nine Beast Vassals at the same time.

“…Senpai.”

“Eh?”

“Are you thinking that you want to do…that again?”

Yukina’s unblinking eyes reflected Kojou’s face back at him. Her very serious look made Kojou straighten his back without thinking. However, he couldn’t quite grasp the meaning of her question.

“What do you mean…that? Again?”

“That. You know…like…sucking on…my…”

Yukina suddenly averted her eyes, skipping over a part, like she was a little angry and a little embarrassed.

As the slender line from her nape to her collarbone drew in his gaze, Kojou finally understood the true meaning behind Yukina’s statement.

Kojou had been able to tame Regulus Aurum because he’d drunk Yukina’s blood. That being the case, drinking her blood once again might allow him to take control over another Beast Vassal—that’s what Yukina was saying.

However, actually carrying it out also meant Kojou’s sexual arousal being directed toward Yukina…

“Er, no! I didn’t mean it *that* way when I was talking just now! It’s not like I think your blood’s tasty, Himeragi, not even a little!”

Kojou desperately denied it. Although the previous emergency situation, with Itogami Island facing destruction, may have made it unavoidable in one sense, this situation was completely different. He thought it was wrong to act that assertively toward Yukina, who was hardly his lover.

“…No interest in my blood, is it? Not even a little…?”

But for some reason, the tone in Yukina’s voice suddenly turned frosty. The expressionless eyes that looked up at Kojou resembled the edge of a frigid knife somehow.

“Anyway, I think I might be able to scrape by on that. I just get the feeling that Vattler isn’t thinking of consuming me right away. If he isn’t careful and backs me into a corner, my Beast Vassal might run wild like it did before.”

Feeling guilty for some reason he couldn’t place, Kojou worked hard to speak in an optimistic voice.

It wasn't something they could depend on at all, but Kojou had a basis for his words. The things immortal vampires hated most were isolation and boredom. To Vattler, the existence of the Fourth Primogenitor was like a long-lost friend or perhaps a foolproof ward against boredom. Kojou vaguely felt both from his attitude.

Besides, Vattler himself had spoken of Beast Vassals running amok if they sensed their host was in danger.

"You may be right." Yukina continued coldly looking up at Kojou as she agreed. "If your uncontrolled Beast Vassals run amok again, the amount you owe will go up by another several tens of billions of yen. Not that the likes of me can do anything about it."

"Er, yeah. Well…mm."

All Kojou could do was mumble awkwardly.

"Also, the Duke of Ardeal's attitude toward you was not one toward one's prey, but rather that of one earnestly seeking a physical relationship, was it not?"

"Please don't say scary things like that. You're really creeping me out here."

"Sorry. My fault, I had a bad premonition. Though there's nothing the likes of me can do about it at any rate."

"Now, er, Himeragi. Might you be, ah, upset at something?"

"No, not at all. Not even a little."

With Yukina's attitude leaving him shipwrecked without an island, Kojou was finally unable to endure more and averted his eyes.

"…Well, I think we should set the Vattler stuff aside and focus on the terrorist problem. I know Natsuki said not to worry about it, but…"

"At this juncture we have so little information, so it's hard to make a decision, isn't it?"

"Info, huh…?"

Kojou crossed his arms and sunk into thought. Certainly being short on info

was a serious problem. He didn't think Natsuki would lie to him, but taking her words at face value and doing nothing would only worry him more. At the very least, they needed other information with which to see what was behind Natsuki's words.

"Come to think of it, she said there was some company that smuggled the Nalakuvera into Itogami City, right?"

Kojou suddenly remembered Natsuki saying something about that.

"Kano Alchemical Industries Corporation, wasn't it? They're a supplier of alchemical components, I think."

"If that's the case, we might be able to look into it on our end. Sorry, but could you head back to the middle school, Himeragi? I'll be in touch later."

"I have a vague idea of what you might be thinking, senpai, but…"

Yukina's expression seemed sulky somehow, as if there was something she wanted to say. For some reason, she paused her words, slowly looking around the area.

As Yukina fell silent, sharpening her senses, Kojou called out to her, confused.

"…Himeragi? Is something wrong?"

"No…" Finally, Himeragi made a quiet exhale, shaking her head as if it was nothing. "I felt like someone was watching me, but it must have been my imagination."

6

When Kojou arrived at the classroom, he was right on the verge of being late, just a moment after the first bell before lessons began. Most of his classmates were already in the classroom. Of course, Asagi was among them.

"—Asagi!"

"Ahh, Kojou. Good morning."

Noticing Kojou quickly approaching her, Asagi made a nonchalant wave. It was as if the tumult in Kojou's room that morning had never happened; her attitude

was exactly the same as usual.

“So you got to school after all. There you go. So it was worth the effort to wake you up.”

“Woke him up? Whaddaya mean?”

Yaze, whom Asagi was teaching sample problems to, picked up her words with his sharp ears. Rin Tsukishima, also nearby, murmured “heh”…as she gave Kojou a look rich in meaning.

“That is not something I can just let pass by.”

“Please do. She slapped me awake and that’s it, really.”

As Kojou dealt with them appropriately, he leaned right beside Asagi. He moved his face close to her ear.

“Anyway, Asagi, you have a minute?”

“Eh? What’s this, out of the blue? Class is about to start.”

Even as her mouth voiced complaints, Kojou insistently grabbed Asagi’s arm; Asagi did not shake him off. Their classmates watched with deep interest as Kojou led Asagi out of the classroom by her hand. But as clumsy excuses would have the opposite of their intended effect, he didn’t say a word. At any rate, without bumping into any teachers, Kojou brought Asagi to the emergency stairs where there was no sign of life.

“Sorry. There’s something I just have to ask of you.”

“What’s that? I have a bad feeling about this but…”

Asagi glared at Kojou with a suspicious look on her face. As expected of someone who’d known Kojou for so long, she seemed able to read him very well.

“I want you to look into the Kano Alchemical Somethin’ Corporation—especially branch companies and research labs here in Itogami City.”

“Huh? Why do I have to skip class to do something like that?”

Kojou earnestly bowed his head in response to Asagi’s natural question.

“I’ll treat you to dinner or dessert after, so please!”

“I don’t wanna. That Himeragi girl probably put you up to it, anyway. I do *not* wanna help with something like that.”

Asagi bared her teeth in irritation as she spoke.

Kojou had vaguely noticed previously, but Asagi and Himeragi didn’t seem to get along very well. He didn’t know the reason why, but their relationship was a rocky one.

“Set that aside, then. At least look into this Nalakuvera thing they’re importing.”

“…Nalakuvera?”

For some reason, Asagi responded to the unexpected word. She grabbed Kojou by the chest and pulled him close.

“What is that? Do you know?”

“Nah. It’s some kind of ancient relic excavated from a tomb somewhere, but…” Kojou explained in a strained voice. It was the information Natsuki had given to him only a bit earlier.

“Ancient relic…huh? And this is related to Kano Alchemical?”

“Yeah. Probably.”

Glaring at the nodding Kojou, Asagi went “hmm” and exhaled. She shifted her gaze toward an empty space as if pondering it a little.

“Fine. I’m just a little interested so I’ll play along.”

Asagi grinned broadly as she spoke.

“Th-that so. Huge help. What should we do?”

“Well, first we need a computer connected to the Internet. At this hour, the student council room maybe?”

“Student council room?”

Come to think of it, Kojou recalled, there were a bunch of terminals used for school website administration and office work.

“But it’s locked, isn’t it? Needs one of those smart cards the security company

uses.”

“It’s all right. Leave it to me.”

As Asagi spoke reassuring words, she grabbed him as she practically leaped forward, walking toward the student council room.

Classes were just about to start, but that didn’t seem to bother her especially. If anything, she seemed to be having fun with the situation with Kojou, but as he was used to her whimsical ways, he didn’t think that was particularly odd.

“I was cracking encryption of this level in kindergarten…see?”

Asagi took out her cell phone, tapped it against the student council room door, and with impressive force, a cascade of numbers flowed across the screen; he didn’t think it was even five seconds when the lock opened. She’d apparently used the phone’s internal digital cash terminal to hack into the security company’s digital lock. Of course, Kojou had not the slightest idea how she could do that.

“…You really are incredible. Now, anyway.”

“Th-this isn’t anything to get worked up about. Cut it out, you’re embarrassing me.”

Asagi’s face reddened as she spoke in a seemingly angry tone. And twisting her tongue in apparent displeasure, she glared at Kojou.

“And aren’t there other things about me you should be complimenting?”

“Eh?”

“What’s with that shocked look?!”

“Ah, now that you mention it, your forelocks are shorter than they usually are I—”

“Well, excuse me for cutting them too short! Just pretend you don’t see it!”

Asagi’s eyebrows stood up as she delivered a left hook to Kojou’s rib cage. Kojou let out an anguished breath. He didn’t really get it, but he had the sense he was getting extremely irrational treatment from her.

“So why do you wanna know about the Kano Alchemical stuff?” Asagi asked

while booting up a computer located in the middle of the room.

“I wanna know about the Nalakuvera thing they’re secretly importing. Apparently it’s been taken by leftovers of a terrorist group called the Black Death Emperor Front.”

“Nalakuvera…huh? I think this is probably what you’re talking about, Kojou.”

Asagi, typing on a computer showing nothing but numbers on the screen, finally displayed some kind of file on a large monitor. What the monitor displayed was a stocky, egg-shaped mass of stone. It was a round body all curled up, like that of an insect. Or perhaps it was a war machine with thick armor cladding its sturdy frame…

“An artifact unearthed in a dormant state in the late twentieth century…so a type of inorganic life-form. A living weapon, huh.”

“Living weapon?”

“In modern terms, it’s something like an unmanned fighter plane. It says, since they think it was based on the Pushpaka Vimana in Indian mythology and the Prince Nezha worshipped by Taoists, it probably has several weapon systems and flight capabilities.”

“I didn’t really get all that, but I gather that it’s dangerous.”

Kojou spoke with a very weighty mood. He didn’t understand what it was in concrete terms, but if this was a weapon on a mythological level, there was no doubt it contained exceptional power. The words Natsuki had used, “weapon of the gods,” might well have been no empty boast.

“Yeah, you could fight even the First Primogenitor with this…so that’s why the Dead Black Emperor Front wants it.”

“First Primogenitor? You’ve been talking nonsense since earlier, you know?”

Asagi narrowed her eyes as she looked at Kojou with suspicion. Unable to come up with a natural-sounding excuse right away, Kojou went, “Er, that’s…,” as he became flustered. Then…

“…!”

A moment later, Asagi fiercely wrapped both arms around Kojou’s neck, pulling

him down onto the floor. Kojou, now glued tight to Asagi in a deep embrace, was very confused.

“A-Asagi?!”

“Shh! Be quiet!”

As Asagi spoke in a quiet voice, she forced Kojou’s body down with her own under the computer desk.

She was staring at the door at the entrance to the student council room. Though Kojou was sure it had been locked from the inside, he felt someone coming in.

“Who is it?”

“Matsui-sensei maybe. Student council advisor. He takes his job unusually seriously.”

Asagi mumbled a “muu” as she made a clawing motion with her fingers.

A middle-aged male teacher came into the student council room, sat on a metal pipe chair, and began putting papers in order. Any way one sliced it, leaving the student council room without him noticing was virtually impossible.

The quick-thinking Asagi had turned off the computer screen, but if Matsui came close, the hiding Kojou and Asagi would be quickly exposed.

“This isn’t the time for admiration! What’ll we do?!”

“I said, be quiet! Wh…where do you think you’re touching?!”

“It’s not on purpose! It’s ’cause you’re pushing on me!”

“I-it’s a tight space so I can’t help it!”

In a quiet voice, Asagi made a meager sigh, but it blew right into Kojou’s ear.

That wasn’t the only place they were close together; one of Kojou’s arms was touching Asagi’s ample breasts, and at some point Kojou’s wrist had come to rest right between Asagi’s thighs.

Asagi couldn’t help being sensitive to every little movement Kojou’s body made.

However, as neither could pull back from the other, both of them stayed down and kept their breathing in check.

Asagi may not have been as slim as Nagisa or Yukina, but the volume of her chest felt much different. He could not help but notice the perfume, shampoo, and other feminine scents drifting in the air.

Realizing his heart was beating faster and his throat was feeling parched, Kojou unwittingly made a sound through clenched teeth. These were ill omens, the precursors of vampiric urges.

At this rate, it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility Kojou might lose his senses and attack the completely unsuspecting Asagi, just as Yukina had worried might happen.

"Asagi…those earrings, are those…"

They were small gold stud earrings. Kojou had bought them for Asagi's birthday…or more precisely, she'd forced him to buy them for her. Today was the first day he'd seen Asagi wearing them. Kojou wondered what kind of change in her mental state *this* indicated.

"You sure took your time noticing, stupid Kojou."

Asagi made a broad, charming smile, her eyes a little teary as she looked up at Kojou. Kojou slipped and thought she was very pretty.

Right around that time, Kojou felt Matsui the teacher leaving the room. His sense of tension dropped like a rock. Then…

"K-Kojou?! Are you all right?!"

The next moment, Asagi's eyes bulged as she saw the large amount of blood spurting from Kojou's bleeding nose.

"Eh? Whoa?!"

Flustered, Kojou covered his nose with both hands. His vampiric urges, having risen all the way to dangerous levels, fell apart with ease and vanished. Yes. Sexual arousal was the source of vampiric urges, but the mouth did not actually care whose blood it was—even if the blood was his.

“Well, what can I say…? I was an idiot to expect something from you with the mood like that.”

Asagi made a meager sigh as she stuffed pocket tissues she’d taken out from somewhere into Kojou’s nostrils. Kojou, having won the battle against the vampiric urges, sniffed with a tired look on his face.

7

“Have you calmed down a little?” Asagi asked with a languid look as she looked at Kojou, tissues still packed into his nose.

Having slipped out of the student council room, Kojou and Asagi were heading to the rooftop garden. On the cramped-feeling Saikai Academy grounds, flower beds and benches had been placed on the rooftops, open to students as a substitute for a courtyard.

That said, the sunlight was indeed fierce, so not many students used it. It was a particularly harsh environment for a vampire like Kojou. But few people making use of it meant that there was little chance of being seen by anyone else, so it was a convenient place for avoiding the prying eyes of students.

“Sorry it ended up with you skipping class.”

“Yeah, it did. Well, I’m all right, but…my grades are good, and I have a surplus of attendance days.”

“Ugh…my attendance days should be just barely enough with the extra lessons on summer break…”

Kojou made a forlorn groan, as if trying to avert his eyes from reality.

Taking an unexcused break from classes was pretty much guaranteed to get him a scolding from Natsuki the next day. While he’d gotten some results in return, the answer was bizarre. The true nature of the Nalakuvera and its location remained unknown. Gardos and his people probably had it right there with them.

Of course, as Natsuki had said, so long as the command method remained

undeciphered, the sample they possessed had quite a crippling flaw. That was the gist of it, anyway.

“Hey…Kojou.”

Watching Kojou’s deep-in-thought face from the side, Asagi suddenly posed a question.

“That Nalakuvera thing from earlier, it was smuggled in along with a stone tablet, right?”

“Yeah. That’s about all I remember, though.”

“That formula written on it, it’s…bad if that gets deciphered, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much. If it had someone sane looking after it that’s one thing…but why is that part bothering you that much?”

“Eh?! No way, it’s not bothering me at all.”

Asagi averted her eyes in an unnatural way as she spoke. *The heck’s that about,* Kojou wanted to ask her, but before he could, Kojou’s stomach made a large rumble. Asagi could barely contain herself.

“Kojou, did you have breakfast?”

“Like I could eat anything in that situation.”

Kojou glared at Asagi with a resentful look. The mastermind behind the spoiling of the Akatsuki residence’s peaceful morning patted Kojou’s back with an unapologetic smile on her face.

“I suppose not. It can’t be helped…Asagi the Kind Sister will grant you half of her bento box.”

“You’re just hungry, I’m sure. Not that I’m complaining about gettin’ half, mind you.”

“You should be more thankful. It isn’t often I split my food up with someone else.”

“I have this feeling I’m always treating you to meals, though.”

Asagi fished her bento box out of the pouch she’d brought with her from class. It was an unexpectedly small lunchbox for a girl who could eat such a surprisingly

large amount.

Noticing that there was only one pair of chopsticks, Asagi seemed to hesitate a bit, but in the end, she apparently didn't mind. After plucking up the plump fried egg, taking a bite as if sampling it, Kojou opened his mouth to say, "What, you eating that?" to which Asagi announced, "You're wide open!" stuffing the rest into Kojou's mouth.

"This is delicious."

"Yeah. I have to admit, that woman knows how to cook."

Asagi spoke about her mother as if they were unrelated. Her parents had only remarried two years before; she wasn't connected by blood to her current mother. It wasn't that they didn't get along, but she felt enough distance with her to avoid calling her "Mom."

As it was somehow a different subject to comment on, Kojou bit into his fried egg while changing the subject.

"To think our school has a place like this."

"Apparently that girlfriend of Motoki's told him about it. It's the first time I've been here myself, since I heard that only couples came here during summer break to eat lunch togeth…"

Having said that much, Asagi suddenly went silent.

She seemed to suddenly realize the situation both of them were in. Here they were, skipping class and sharing the same bento. Furthermore, she'd used her own chopsticks to bring food to Kojou's mouth…

An impartial observer could not believe they were anything but a couple on very good terms.

"I-I'm going to get something to drink. You can have the rest of it!"

"R-right."

After pushing the bento box onto Kojou, Asagi ran off with incredible vigor. Kojou didn't understand the reason why she'd blush like that *now*, but without thinking deeply, he figured, *Guess she has moods like that some days*.

At any rate, he gratefully ate up the meal handed to him and began to think about how he'd get the information about the Nalakuvera to Yukina.

It was the next moment when the concrete bench Kojou was sitting on shattered with a great roar.

"…Th-the heck?!"

A moment later, Kojou's body was sent flying by the blast.

The impact toyed with Kojou like a rag doll, making him roll onto the roof's surface along with the rubble.

He wondered if the bench had exploded, but of course that was impossible. There was a one-meter diameter crater gouging the spot where the bench had been a moment before.

The damage was as if someone had tossed a hand grenade, but he did not detect any scent of explosives. In its place was the vestige of ritual energy. It was a release of internal power resembling Yukina's special skills—a physical attack incorporating ritual arts.

"—You're really quite something, Kojou Akatsuki, skipping class to go on a secret rendezvous with a classmate."

Kojou, lying faceup, heard a scornful voice coming from above his head.

Immediately looking up, Kojou saw a tall, slender teenage girl.

She was wearing a short, pleated skirt and a summer vest. That much fit a normal schoolgirl, but the giant sword in her left hand decidedly did not.

It made him think of an airplane wing. It was a long, elegant sword. The blade was about 120 centimeters long. The sword blade was thick, seemingly fused along a pattern of straight lines that ran across its surface. It had a silvery glow as it reflected the rays of the sun, greatly resembling Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf.

"You're…the girl from yesterday…"

Kojou knew this girl's name. She wore her long chestnut-colored hair bunched up in a ponytail. Like a cherry blossom in bloom, she had neat, charming, beautiful looks. And she was gazing at Kojou with a menacing look…

This was Sayaka Kirasaka, War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

“What the heck are you doing here? Aren’t you keeping Vattler under surveillance?” Kojou asked as he got on one knee and then rose, glaring right back at Sayaka. Sayaka’s expression did not even twitch.

“Right now, the *Oceanus Grave* is anchored outside of Japanese territorial jurisdiction. Dimitrie Vattler is currently retired to bed. My observation mission has been temporarily suspended.”

“Oh, really. So what does that have to do with blowing up the bench I was sitting on?”

“…I have been observing your actions until now, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Sayaka pointed the tip of her sword at Kojou as she spoke. Kojou gripped his head in frustration.

“You’ve been ‘observing’ me, too?! Is that all people from the Lion King Agency do?!”

“Silence, criminal!”

“C-criminal?!” Kojou’s mouth was agape at Sayaka’s unexpected rebuke.

Seeing Kojou’s reaction, the corners of Sayaka’s eyes rose farther.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Fourth Primogenitor. You’ve sucked Yukina’s blood, haven’t you?”

“Uhh…” Kojou faltered as his greatest debt to Yukina was pointed out. “That couldn’t be helped! It was the only way to deal with the emergency situation at the time—”

“I understand that. Of course I do. If not, my little angel Yukina would never have tamely let a stupid fool of a worthless, filthy man like you suck her blood.”

“Do you have to put it that way?!”

Naturally Kojou lost his temper and protested. However lowly he felt on the inside, he didn’t want to hear all that from a girl he only just met.

However, Sayaka gripped her sword with both hands as she shook with anger.

“You are the man called the Fourth Primogenitor. If you had been a man

worthy of that title, wrapped in a noble, dignified personality worthy of Yukina, with an income of over ten million yen yearly, and castrated yourself as proof of your eternal love and absolute submission to her, I thought I'd spare your life alone, but…"

"That's crazy talk! Aren't those insanely high standards?!"

"And yet when I came and saw you, you were flirting with other girls…"

"Wait a sec, what are you talking about?"

"Playing dumb will get you nowhere. Since morning, you brought a classmate into your own bed, slipped a secret rendezvous in the student council room past Yukina's eyes, and on top of that had a fun time on a secluded rooftop, eating food, sharing the same chopsticks, I saw all of it. How indecent!"

Sayaka became furious all by her lonesome as she laid out the charges before Kojou.

Seeing the glow of her raised sword, Kojou's cheeks went pale.

"W-wait! Asagi and I didn't actually do anything to apologize for…"

"That's what all unfaithful men say! 'Lustrous Scale'!"

"—Wait, what are you trying to do with that sword?!"

"Yukina came to this island to watch over the Fourth Primogenitor. If you die, there'll be no reason for her to stay here, and no actions of yours that can make that girl cry…!"

"Why does it have to be like this?!"

Kojou raised an unrestrained yell at Sayaka's exceedingly overbearing, wildly leaping logic.

However, Sayaka was beyond reasoning with, swinging her sword down without mercy.

It was a sword attack so swift that even Kojou's vampire-boosted kinetic vision couldn't completely follow it. Kojou rolled, relying mostly on intuition, just barely avoiding a direct hit.

"Why did you dodge that?!"

“If I didn’t dodge it, I’d die!!”

“So die like a man already, Enemy of Woman! How dare you humiliate my Yukina!”

Sayaka continued to swing her sword as she continued pressing her irrational claims. All Kojou did was run for his life.

In pure combat proficiency, Sayaka’s swordsmanship was as good as Yukina’s or better. However, thanks to her anger, she was putting in an excessive amount of force, dulling her normal skill in the process. Thanks to that, Kojou was somehow able to evade her attacks.

“Running your lips across her neck, breathing on it, nibbling on it, she doesn’t even let *me* do that often! Unforgivable!!”

“You mean this is just jealousy?!”

“If it wasn’t for you, she wouldn’t have to face such danger. She has no reason to fight the Lotharingian Armed Apostle and the Black Death Emperor Front remnants at all!”

“Uhh.”

Though Sayaka had lost herself to her anger, her words accurately struck the parts of Kojou he least wanted touched. Yukina having to devote most of her daily life to watching Kojou and her being involved in dangerous combat were both attributable to Kojou’s existence. So long as Kojou continued to be watched by Yukina, Yukina would be bound to Kojou’s existence. No matter how stubborn she was, no matter what noisy lectures he might endure, that was why Kojou could not bring himself to hate her.

“You don’t have just that Aiba girl. You have a little sister, two parents, and lots of friends at school, don’t you?! And you want to take Yukina from me?! My only friend in the whole world…?!”

Thanks to Sayaka’s yelling robbing him of the ability to concentrate, Kojou was just a moment too late reacting to her attack.

Sayaka thrust her sword forward with such a force that it was like bloodlust given physical form. As he realized he couldn’t evade it, Kojou girded himself for

the impending pai—

“Oh, crap…!”

That instant, every hair on Kojou’s body stood up as he realized something was shifting inside him. He sensed the awakening of great demonic power; he had the sense his blood was boiling throughout his body. Responding to Kojou’s instincts for self-defense, one of his sleeping Beast Vassals was waking up: a new Beast Vassal he could not yet control…

“Eh?!”

Sayaka’s expression froze as her sword, which should have thrust through him, was deflected.

Her attack had bounced off an invisible wall that had sprung up with Kojou at its center.

The invisible wall was really a shock wave. The vibration, rumbling like an earthquake, made cracks run along the concrete rooftop, while Kojou was enveloped in a swell in the air that had become a whirlwind. The Beast Vassal gave rise to this level of calamity even before awakening, using only a small fraction of its magical power. Then…

“Kojou?!”

Unable to do anything but stand still, Kojou’s ears heard the shout of a girl. It was Asagi, carrying a plastic bottle, who had shouted. She’d bought her drink and returned.

Noticing Sayaka confronting Kojou, Asagi came running. Asagi’s willfulness had come out at the worst possible time. Nor could Sayaka, standing still in the face of the unexpected situation, do anything to deal with it.

“Dammit! Asagi, stay back!!”

Kojou screamed, not caring how he looked. It was taking all Kojou’s strength to stop the Beast Vassal from running amok; he had nothing left for controlling the leakage of demonic energy.

“Eh?! Ow…ah…aaaah!”

The indiscriminately released atmospheric tremor assaulted Asagi as a

destructive, supersonic boom.

Asagi covered both of her ears in anguish and collapsed then and there. She'd lost consciousness, unable to withstand the violent change in atmospheric pressure.

"Kojou Akatsuki! Stop this…!" Sayaka shouted while brandishing her sword. That sword's protection was no doubt why she was fine despite the same supersonic boom as had hit Asagi crashing over her as well. However, unlike Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf, it apparently couldn't completely negate Kojou's magical energy.

The destruction of the rooftop, unable to withstand the release of such enormous demonic power, accelerated.

"Asagi!"

Kojou raised his voice in anguish as he realized Asagi's body, lying on the rooftop, would be caught up in the destruction.

That instant, he heard a shrill *ting* sound, like two pieces of metal meeting each other, and a small shadow danced above Kojou and Sayaka's heads.

"—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee!"

Her school uniform's skirt and her black hair fluttering as she landed, a schoolgirl poised a long, silver-colored spear. As if dancing, she waved the spear about, thrusting the tip into the rooftop, which itself was on the verge of shattering.

"Oh, divine wolf of the snowdrift, let the echoes of thy thousand howls become a shield and repel this calamity!"

As if responding to her solemn incantation, the silver-colored spear emitted light.

This was the glow of the Schneewaltzer, the Lion King Agency's secret weapon, able to rend any barrier and to nullify the demonic energy of a primogenitor.

As if cowed by its radiance, Kojou's release of magical energy ceased as well. The ground tremors and atmospheric sounds made by the Beast Vassal on the verge of awakening vanished as well; Kojou's sense that his own blood was on

fire also eased. Though he had not succeeded in controlling the Beast Vassal, the danger of it running wild seemed to have passed for the moment. Though the rooftop looked like a ruin, with cracks everywhere, Asagi was safe, if not by much.

Kojou and Sayaka, their strength exhausted, simultaneously sank down where they had stood.

They were still like that as Yukina slowly approached.

“What are the two of you doing in a place like this?”

Speaking very curtly, she thrust the end of Snowdrift Wolf into the ground right before their eyes.

No doubt she’d sensed Kojou and Sayaka fighting and had rushed out of class. Yukina’s slender shoulders seemed to make little bounces up and down as she breathed.

“Er, that’s… Miss Jealousy here launched an unprovoked attack…”

“Th-that’s not true. This pervert was engaging in indecent behavior behind your back…”

Like puppies being scolded, Kojou and Sayaka pointed at each other as they spoke.

Yukina put a hand on her hip, speaking as if she was a sister several years older.

“I can largely guess what happened here, but…Sayaka.”

“Y-yes?”

“Watching the Fourth Primogenitor is *my* mission. Do you wish to interfere with that, Sayaka? Do you trust me so little?”

Sayaka’s back shook like a scared little girl as she vigorously shook her head.

Yukina exhaled rather deeply.

“And senpai…of course, you understand what would happen if a Beast Vassal went berserk in a place like this. How would you take responsibility if something happened to all the students here?”

“…Sorry. I’ll do better. Sorry.”

Kojou felt like vanishing as he bent his back forward.

If Yukina hadn't come when she did, Asagi would definitely have been hurt from Kojou's magical energy running wild. When he pictured that, his body was gripped by a great deal of fear.

Compared to his fear of losing Asagi, Yukina's bitter scolding felt like the gentle reproach of an affectionate mother.

But Kojou's relief lasted no longer than that.

"Yukina! You ran out so fast and hard, are you all right?!"

Kojou heard agitated footsteps when a schoolgirl in a middle school uniform poked her face out. It was Nagisa's familiar voice. In surprise, Nagisa looked over at Asagi, lying on the half-destroyed rooftop, and Kojou and Sayaka in the middle of reflecting on their sins.

"What happened? Wow, what is this? Why's the rooftop all messed up?! And, Asagi?! Is she hurt?! What'll we do?!"

"…Both of you, please reflect on what you've done for a while. Nagisa and I will bring Asagi-senpai to the clinic room, so please go. Take care of Snowdrift Wolf for me."

Yukina, speaking in a quiet voice, handed the spear over to Kojou in its neatly folded carrying form.

Certainly they couldn't just leave Asagi lying down like that; but having said that, she couldn't waltz into the clinic room with her spear in hand. As she would also have to administer first aid to the unconscious Asagi, Yukina and Nagisa would bring Asagi together with them to the clinic room. As Yukina's plan was quite logical, Kojou had no special objections.

With one exception.

"Eh? By reflecting together…you can't mean, me and Miss Jealousy here?!"

"Wh-wh-why do I have to be with this indecent man?!"

Kojou and Sayaka hurled insults at one another as they fiercely objected.

Yukina looked down at both of them, her eyes as frigid as a glacier.

“Is there a problem with that?”

Kojou and Sayaka silently shook their heads, both kneeling formally then and there to display their willingness to consider their mistakes.

8

There was no sign of the special needs teacher in the clinic room; there, substituting for her in her absence, was Astarte.

Astarte was normally quite close to the clinic room; apparently Natsuki had picked up on the girl’s usefulness, dragging the girl home as her own personal maid.

Currently, the homunculus girl was clad in a somewhat perverse maid outfit, complete with a white apron, leaning over the side of the bed as Asagi slept.

Originally, she was a homunculus designed by a pharmaceutical producer for drug experiments. She had the knowledge required to function in a medical setting burned into her flash ROM as part of her basic setup. It was said she had a high degree of medical knowledge equal to a freshly certified doctor.

“—Medical check completed.”

Having completed a simple check, Astarte raised her expressionless voice.

“I deduce light shock caused by a shock wave and a sudden change in air pressure. There need be no concern about aftereffects. However, I recommend rest and quiet for the remainder of the day.”

“Understood. Thank you very much.”

Yukina exhaled in relief, thanking Astarte now that her diagnosis was complete.

Even Yukina’s hardened cheeks regained just a bit of their softness. That Asagi had not been seriously injured was good news. If Kojou learned Asagi was not all right, he would surely be hurt deeply.

And half hiding behind the relieved Yukina’s back, Nagisa was fidgeting about.

“Y-Yukina, it’s a maid. I’ve never seen a real maid before. Why is there a maid

in the clinic room? Or is that a new style of white gown? Some kind of freebie for the students? Yukina, do you know her?”

“Er…”

Yukina was a bit at a loss for Nagisa’s rapid-fire questions. They were all questions to which Yukina was uncertain what response to make. So, in place of the distressed Yukina…

“Astarte is a maid in my employ, Nagisa Akatsuki.”

Natsuki, suddenly entering the clinic room, tossed her statement out without compunction.

Nagisa glanced over, her eyes widening in shock.

“Ah, Ms. Minamiya. Thank you for always taking care of my brother. Those clothes are very pretty.”

“A very polite girl, I see, quite unlike your brother.”

Natsuki returned Nagisa’s polite bow of her head with a brazen, haughty smile. Even the ever-vainglorious Natsuki was happy when complimented for her clothes.

Then Natsuki glanced back at the still-sleeping Asagi.

“And this is the result of your lack of rigor as a watcher, transfer student.”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

Yukina made no excuses and lowered her head. “Hmph,” Natsuki snorted, seeming annoyed. “Then I’ll leave cleaning up this mess to you. I’d really like to go pay that fool Kojou Akatsuki a visit right now, but I have an urgent matter to attend to.”

“…You know where the Black Death Emperor Front is hiding?” Yukina furrowed her eyebrows as she asked.

“The sub-float currently under construction. It’s a straight-up hideout. I understand how you feel, but do not stick your nose into this. Handling these terrorists is our job.”

As Yukina nodded in acknowledgment, Natsuki made a composed smile.

“I’ll leave Astarte here. If you’re short on nurses, use her.”

Natsuki left her comment behind as she immediately left the room.

In the meantime, Nagisa had begun treating the sleeping Asagi.

Treatment didn’t mean anything special; while adjusting her blankets and checking the position of her pillow, she looked jealously upon Asagi’s long eyelashes, making a sigh of lament, and sniffed her perfume just a little.

Yukina couldn’t help but make a strained smile at how Nagisa’s form made her muse upon Nagisa’s blood ties to Kojou…

…The next moment, Asagi suddenly opened her eyes.

“Er…where is this? The clinic room?”

Asagi winced in pain as she put a hand to her head, slowly getting up.

In front of her, Nagisa leaned over with great vigor.

“Asagi, you’re awake? You know who I am? How many fingers do you see? Does it hurt anywhere? Did Kojou do something to you?”

Asagi was taken aback for a while at Nagisa’s forceful inquisition.

“It’s hard getting grilled like that just after waking up. Mm, what happened, anyway?”

“Errr, seems like one of the roof’s pipes ruptured. That’s when you fainted from shock.”

“Pipe? Rupture? Ahh, come to mention it I think I heard this high-pitched sound.”

Asagi furled her eyebrows as if recalling the unpleasant experience.

“Mm, but I thought Kojou was being chased around by some weird chick with a sword… Where’s Kojou?”

“I’m sorry, Aiba. She’s a friend of mine. Akatsuki-senpai is safe as well.”

Yukina timidly stepped out in front of Asagi as she spoke.

As if perplexed, Asagi’s eyes batted at Yukina’s sudden confession. Asagi didn’t seem to understand what Yukina was doing here in the first place.

“…Err, you’re Himeragi, aren’t you? What was your friend doing attacking Kojou?”

Yukina became a bit incoherent at Asagi’s highly legitimate question.

“That’s, I think…jealousy directed at Akatsuki-senpai, perhaps?”

“Jealousy? What, because I was together with Kojou?”

“I suppose so. That is one cause, I think.”

Sayaka’s jealousy was directed against Kojou for stealing Yukina from her, but of course Asagi knew no such thing. More simply, Sayaka was jealous because she and Kojou were getting along—Asagi understood that to mean, in other words, Sayaka was fond of Kojou.

That moment was when Asagi internally pegged Sayaka as “foe.”

And of course, Nagisa, who had the same misunderstanding, drew close to Yukina, seeming quite full of interest.

“What’s the meaning of this? She’s not a Saikai Academy student. She’s very pretty, but since when did Kojou know her, anyway? Was it good to leave Kojou together with her? There’s not going to be some weird chemistry between them…?”

“Eh? R-right. I think Akatsuki-senpai and Sayaka will be all right now but…”

The tail end of Yukina’s words petered out, no doubt because she couldn’t reject the possibility that both would resume their dispute. However, her halfhearted answer only annoyed Asagi further.

“How can you just dismiss it like that?”

“…Asagi?”

Nagisa raised her voice in surprise at Asagi’s tone of voice, which had become very sharp.

Asagi shrugged her shoulders a little.

“This has been bothering me for a while. What kind of relationship do you have with Kojou? Kojou’s always sneaking around with you, but what do you know about Kojou?”

“That’s… I’m sorry, I cannot answer that.”

Yukina firmly shook her head. Asagi glared at Yukina further, making a sound of displeasure.

“The heck is that. Fine, I’ll just have to ask Kojou myse—”

“No, er, Asagi-senpai…!”

Yukina nervously moved to stop Asagi as she pulled off her blanket and rose up.

Astarte, having so far not said a word, took that moment to wedge herself into the girls’ conversation.

“—Warning. I have detected the presence of intruders within the school.”

“Intruders?”

Asagi, of course, froze in shock at the completely unexpected words, but Yukina did as well.

“Two intruders in total. Based on their movement speed and endurance, I deduce that they are unregistered demons.”

Astarte steadily continued her warning. Yukina’s eyes immediately rose to the rooftop.

“Demons?! They couldn’t be after Akatsuki-senpai?”

“Negative. I anticipate that this location, the Saikai Academy Clinic Room, is their intended target.”

“Eh?”

For a moment, Yukina could not comprehend the meaning of what Astarte’s words conveyed.

As she stood there, someone suddenly clung to her back.

“No way…,” Nagisa murmured as her entire body shook violently. Hearing her voice put Yukina in shock.

She was muttering weakly, as if a completely different person than her usual lively self.

Nagisa's terrified face was completely pale; her fingertips were cold, as if they'd lost all blood flow. This was clearly no ordinary condition.

"Nagisa?"

"What'll we do, Yukina…? I'm…scared…"

Yukina was bewildered, embracing Nagisa, who continued to shudder like a newborn chick, with one hand.

She had heard that the residents of Itogami Island, a Demon Sanctuary, made them accustomed to the existence of demons. In fact, even when the people on the island saw demons with their demon IDs in the city, it gathered little attention. Middle school girls wearing short skirts were subject to far more intense gazes.

The crime rate among registered demons was well below average; if demons committed a crime, the well-armed Island Guard came out in force to restore order. The ordinary residents of the island had no reason to fear demons.

But that did not explain why Nagisa was so frightened.

"I don't really get this, but let's run for it. It's better than staying here!"

Perhaps because she saw Nagisa shaking like that, Asagi spoke those words while heading for the clinic room exit.

But before she arrived, the door opened violently.

Seeing the silhouette barging in, Asagi let out a short yelp.

A large man wearing a gray military uniform appeared as if to block Asagi's path. His face was covered with silver bestial hair, with sharp fangs poking out from his tapered lips.

"…Beast man?"

Hearing Asagi's murmur, Nagisa made a sound of fright. Strength surged into the arm Yukina was embracing her with. Yukina was confident she could defeat a single beast man in unarmed combat.

But that was if Yukina was alone. It was far more difficult if she had to cover Asagi and Nagisa, even if she had the element of surprise; all the more so with

Nagisa in this state of despair.

Leaving her spear behind had been a complete blunder on Yukina's part. Even on school grounds, she should never have let Snowdrift Wolf go.

"You found her, Grigore?"

Another beast man wearing a military uniform entered after the first. This one was still in human form, but the middle-aged man possessed an incredibly oppressive aura.

"It's one of these three, Lieutenant Colonel. Comparing their scents one by one, we'll know soon enough."

Speaking in a grating, hard-to-understand voice, the beast man tossed the small shoe in his hand onto the floor.

Upon seeing this, Yukina inhaled sharply. They'd come all the way to the clinic room following the scent of that shoe. In other words, the owner of the shoe was who they were after.

"I can't tell these Japanese faces apart… Fine, then. Bring them all. They'll serve as bargaining chips, I'm sure. As hostages."

"…"

Asagi slowly backed away while glaring at the approaching beast man.

A moment later, an antiseptic, unaccented voice echoed throughout the room as the girl in a white gown stepped forward.

"—Homunculus Guardianship Regulations, Special Exception Number Two, Basic Self-Defense, Invoked. Execute, Rhododac—"

But she never completed issuing her command to her man-made Beast Vassal.

With a speed that even Yukina could not react to, the man in the military uniform, who'd been called Lieutenant Colonel, drew his pistol and shot her.

In an instant, six shots struck Astarte, sending her body suddenly flying right against the wall. Asagi and the others were in shock at the ghastly scene unfolding right before their eyes.

"…Lieutenant Colonel?"

The beast man's face questioned if his superior's attack was overkill against a little girl, even if she was a homunculus.

"I sensed a strange demonic energy flowing from this doll—some kind of self-defense system, perhaps."

The lieutenant colonel spoke casually as he put his gun away. He spoke with no special self-reflection or regret.

But Yukina, watching his savage attitude, knew that he had made the correct decision as a soldier.

An artificial Beast Vassal with overwhelming combat capability dwelled within Astarte's body. Without any prior warning, he'd detected its presence and had rendered the host incapable of combat before she could summon the Beast Vassal—not a decision a normal military man could make. This man was an absurdly skilled, first-rate soldier. There was no way Yukina could defeat him without Snowdrift Wolf in her hands. No, she wasn't sure she could win, even with Snowdrift Wolf…

"Ahh, sorry for scaring you. Relax. If you obey our instructions, we don't intend to cause you any harm."

The lieutenant colonel spoke in fluent Japanese as if to ease the terrified girls' concerns.

"One among you is Asagi Aiba, yes? We have a little job we'd like you to do. I promise that once it's finished, we'll release the three of you unharmed."

"…Who are you people?"

As if to shield Yukina and the others, Asagi stepped forward, questioning the men back. She had to be just as scared as the rest of them, but her voice did not tremble at all.

The lieutenant colonel looked over Asagi's valiant display with an expression of praise. Precisely because he was a soldier of such valor, he displayed respect for courage in others. Perhaps it was simply their fashion.

"I apologize for our rudeness. I am a crude man who knows nothing but battlefield tactics and must apologize for not introducing myself to a lady."

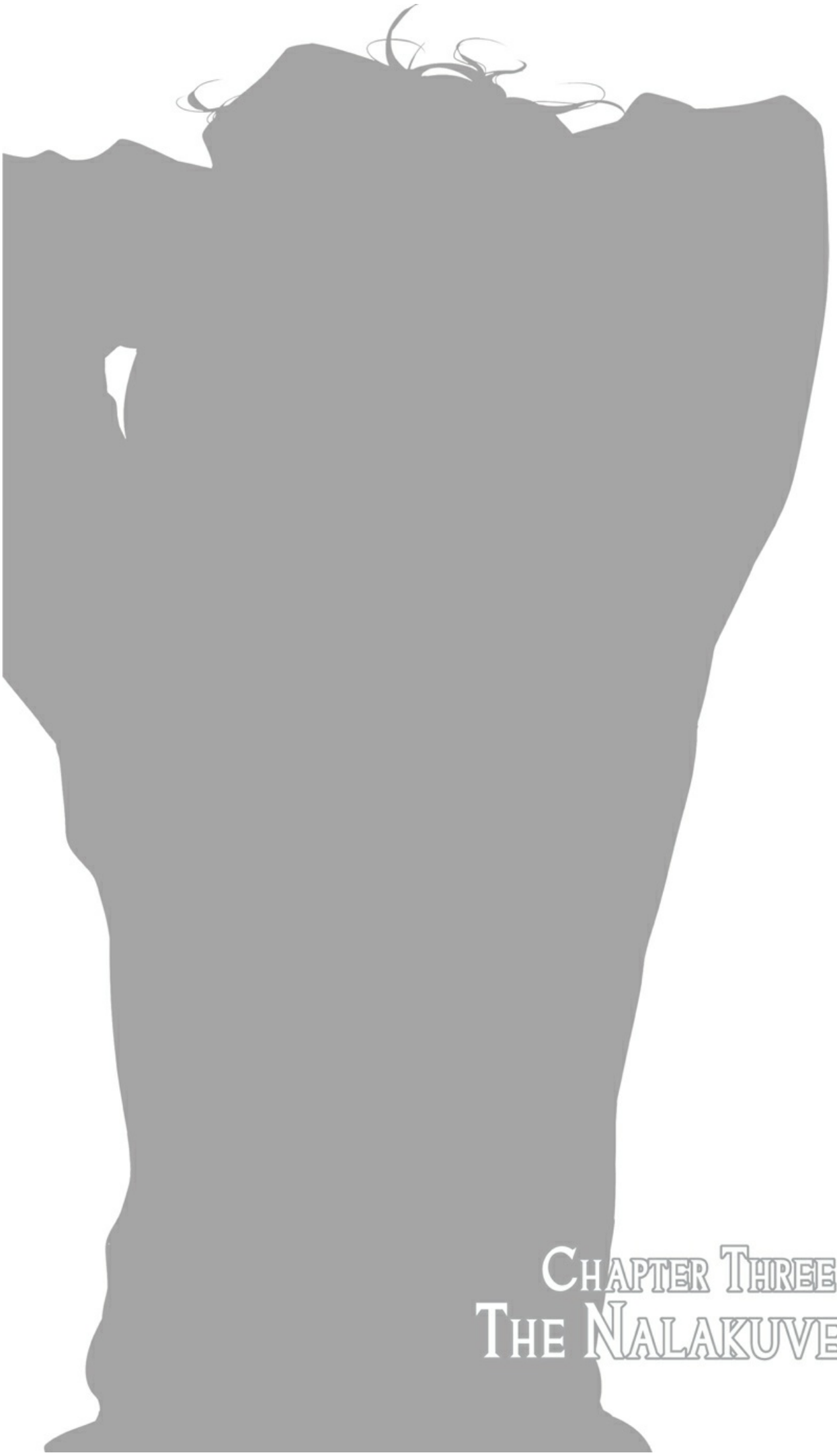
The man who had been called Lieutenant Colonel removed his hat as he spoke with a gentlemanly demeanor.

“My name is Kristof Gardos—a former soldier of the Warlord’s Empire, currently a revolutionary activist. Some would call me a terrorist.”

As he named himself Gardos, Yukina watched him, sucked in her breath.

He had a great forehead and a sharp, hooked nose. He had an elderly face boasting both intelligence and a stern, oppressive feeling.

On his cheek was a scar that stood out. A large, old scar…



Chapter Three
The Nalakuvera

CHAPTER THREE

THE NALAKUVERA

1

A lone young man ran, threading the spaces between the buildings stretching around the monorail platform.

He was wearing a Saikai Academy boy's high school uniform. His hair was short and lightly dyed; he wore closed-type headphones around his neck.

He was Motoki Yaze, classmate of the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki.

"Aw crap, Kojou, you bastard, *that's* the place you pick to rampage through?"

Yaze clicked his tongue in irritation at the sandstorm-like noise that still afflicted his ears.

Itogami Island's weather was good that day, with a rare, gentle breeze blowing. However, as he stood on the monorail platform, powerful eddies blew roughly all around him.

"My 'soundscape' is a wreck thanks to you! Those Beast Vassals of yours are nothing but trouble."

As Yaze spoke, he fished a number of medicinal pills out of a pocket. They were twin-colored capsules that resembled cold medicine sold over the counter. Tossing them into his mouth, he violently crunched them without even a sip of water.

Motoki Yaze had a special type of genetic makeup known as "Hyper-Adapter." He was no demon, but a human born with unusual abilities. A psychic might be a much simpler way to put it.

The Yaze family was deeply involved in the corporate alliance that founded the Demon Sanctuary, but it was also a family line that cranked out a great many people with special abilities. Motoki, too, was one of those aberrant people.

Using a type of psychokinesis, Yaze's sense of hearing was as accurate as a high-precision radar system. It was as if he saw sound with his own eyes. Using his uncanny sense of hearing, Yaze had a monitoring net deployed all over Saikai Academy, allowing him to observe everything within the school. Kojou was one of the people he was monitoring.

A passive ability reliant only on listening to sound—furthermore, even Yukina, possessing excellent Spirit Sight, could not detect Yaze's watching.

But his soundscape had weaknesses, of course.

Just like how an image from a camera bathed in bright light will be washed out, big, explosive noises destroyed the soundscape. The seismic waves released by Kojou's Beast Vassal were more than powerful enough to rip his delicate field to shreds.

It took some seventy-four minutes to re-create the field as it was destroyed. Asagi Aiba's abduction had coincided with the time his defenses had been down.

"Going after Asagi with that timing, though…that Gardos bastard ain't right in the head, either!" Yaze muttered while tossing several more capsules into his mouth.

It was right after Kojou's Beast Vassal had released so much demonic energy. Of course Gardos and his men had noticed the existence of the Fourth Primogenitor. However, in that moment, it was equally true that Saikai Academy's security system had been taken down in the process. Their top priority was the timing for success with the abduction, even at the risk of encountering a primogenitor.

That took no small amount of courage.

Yaze was chasing the Black Death Emperor Front car Asagi and the others were being transported in.

He was on his own two legs pursuing the car running at some sixty kilometers per hour. The ninety-kilometer-per-hour tailwind blowing fiercely all around him

made it possible for him to sprint at that speed in bursts.

The flow and direction of the signal might change, but microphones and speakers fundamentally worked the same way. It was the same for Yaze's ability. His ability, normally used to passively "listen," was now creating a disturbance in the movement of the atmosphere; in that moment, Yaze had created a squall of his own volition, freely manipulating the flow of the air.

Of course, this wasn't a power a flesh-and-blood human could use without cost.

The pills Yaze had taken were chemical drugs that boosted his abilities temporarily. The side effects were serious, and overuse would bring a suitably heavy cost. Even so, they were all he could rely on at the moment.

"Heliport? Are they planning to take them off Itogami Island…?"

Realizing where the Black Death Emperor Front was heading to, Yaze finally lowered his speed.

It was a civilian aviation company's helipad at Island East. Most of its business was aerial photography and sightseeing tours for tourists, but it rented out helicopters as well.

A helicopter apparently kept on standby lifted off as soon as Asagi and the other tied-up girls were loaded into it.

If they were heading off the island, even Yaze's ability wouldn't be able to follow them farther. But—

"…Will it reach?"

Yaze gulped down a large number of pills, covered his ears with his headphones, and closed his eyes.

He unleashed his ability, feeling as if his nerves were on fire. Yaze's field of vision suddenly opened wide, giving him a clear picture even tens of kilometers over the ocean.

Several hundred meters above Yaze's head, a double of him was created out of the airflow itself. Using atmospheric vibrations to emulate his flesh and nervous system, he transferred his consciousness to it. Yaze named this, his trump card,

“Air Loading.”

Though it used the same principle as astral projection by spiritualists, Air Loading, related but with the advantage of physical form, could convey images just as accurately as the physical eye.

But as he discovered the destination of the helicopter now far over the ocean, Yaze was deeply perplexed.

“That’s the Black Death Emperor Front’s hideout…? What’s the meaning of this?!”

A moment later, Yaze heard a sarcastic voice coming from directly behind his real body.

“Acoustic control, I presume? Hmm…quite a rare ability; quite different from Druid magic. Perhaps an ability similar to mystics on the continent?”

“The hell?!”

The drawback of Yaze’s ability was projecting his consciousness to his double greatly reduced his own body’s awareness.

He barely managed to respond to the voice, but he still couldn’t locate the speaker.

Then Yaze sensed a massive surge of magical energy from behind him.

It had a weighty explosiveness to it that rivaled even Kojou’s Beast Vassals.

“What the heck’s that power—?!”

Yaze’s double was enveloped by magic power resembling a ray of light and annihilated. Someone on the ground had shot his concentrated mass of air out of the sky as it flew some several hundred meters aboveground.

Letting out an anguished moan from the pain of the backlash, Yaze collapsed onto the ground.

“That’s crazy. Why are you…?!”

This time he shouted at the sight of the man standing there.

Standing against the backlighting was a tall man, laughing as he lightly snapped his fingers.

A giant mass of flame writhed behind his back.

“Sorry, it’s inconvenient for me if you interfere with them just yet…Don’t worry, you won’t die. Probably.”

Before the man finished speaking, the flame snake lashed out at the ground beneath Yaze’s feet. The superheated cinder blocks burst apart; pulled down by gravity, they fell in pieces like an avalanche.

Below was the watery surface of a transport canal that continued to the ocean. Unable to even scream, Yaze was pulled down along with the debris, making a spectacular splash and sinking down into the muddy water.

2

Around that time, Kojou and Sayaka were seated beside each other at the emergency stairway behind the school gym, away from prying eyes. At first the atmosphere had been very stormy, but as time passed, that had indeed waned.

With unexcited expressions on their faces, both gazed up absentmindedly, watching the flow of the clouds, until Sayaka finally made a small yawn. As she did so, Kojou glanced in her direction, watching the side of her face.

“…Wh-what are you looking at?”

Sayaka suddenly glared at him, her cheeks reddening.

“Err. Sorry,” Kojou apologized with an annoyed wave. Sayaka’s lips curled in annoyance at how Kojou was dismissing her like a noisy puppy.

Similar sour notes had been struck several times over since earlier, thoroughly draining Kojou and Sayaka’s mental energy.

“Hey. How long do we have to be like this for?”

“Until Yukina comes back, I’d think?”

As Sayaka spoke, she clutched a pair of bags she’d placed on top of her knees. One contained the keyboard case that held Sayaka’s sword. The other was the guitar case holding Yukina’s spear.

“Just to make things clear, I don’t really want to spend even a single moment

together with an indecent man like you. What if I get pregnant from breathing the same air as you?”

“Like that can happen!! Whaddaya think a vampire is?!”

“I wouldn’t put it past you. You drank *my* Yukina’s blood—you drank *my* Yukina’s blood!!”

With a resentful tone of voice, Sayaka made a subdued groan. Kojou thought, *Well, this is depressing,* making a deep sigh.

Thanks to that, Kojou somehow realized for himself that both of them were just being stubborn.

If he was dealing with someone younger, like Yukina, he’d just smile and let little bits of trouble roll off of him; if it was someone older, like Natsuki—appearances aside—he’d be plenty willing to exercise humility.

As he was thinking about that, he suddenly met Sayaka’s eyes. She seemed to have been watching Kojou for the whole time he was thinking. Then…

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

After getting along so poorly, both opened their mouths at the same time. Sayaka made an annoyed snort, urging Kojou, “You go first.” Kojou shrugged his shoulders in dismay.

“Er…I mean, sorry. For stuff.”

“Huh?” Sayaka’s eyes widened in shock. “Why are you apologizing? It’s creeping me out.”

“Oh shut up! I mean, I think you were right to say what you said, Kirasaka.”

As Kojou spoke, he pulled the hood of the parka he was wearing down over his eyes. Talking about this while looking into the other person’s eyes was making him blushy somehow.

“With the Armed Apostle old man not long ago and with the terrorist business this time, Himeragi’s been involved in troublesome incidents on my account. So I thought, it’s natural that her friend would be upset about it.”

For some reason, Sayaka tapered her lips with a look of dissatisfaction.

“Certainly it is your fault, but it couldn’t be helped because it’s Yukina’s mission to watch over you; it’s not like she’s helping you because she *wants* to. You don’t really need to worry yourself about it.”

“Ah…well, that may be so, but it’s still true she helped me.”

Kojou shook his head with a pained smile mixed in. Sayaka was such a contrarian that she’d switched to consoling Kojou midway through her words. Having herself realized that midway, Sayaka made an expression of loathing.

“You’re certainly an odd vampire… Usually I don’t think one would thank someone watching him. Or maybe you go for that sort of thing?”

“I’m not thanking anyone for being watched,” Kojou said back in a sullen voice.

“It’s just, the watching’s a bother, but Himeragi’s a good person.”

“I thought you were a completely hopeless man, but it seems you’re at least somewhat sentient. I’ll concede that much.”

Sayaka looked pleased somehow as she spoke. It seemed his complimenting Yukina put her in a good mood. *She really does like Yukina,* Kojou thought with a smile, *so why does she have to look down on me like this?*

“But I can’t give credit for such plain compliments. If you’re going to properly praise Yukina, you need to show more resolve and respect.”

“…What’s a way to compliment with resolve and respect?”

“It’s nothing complicated. All you need to do is faithfully describe Yukina as she really is: her fair skin; the soft, golden hair of her cheek; the little mole under her collarbone; those lines from her shoulder blades, just like an angel’s wings, to her oh-so-tight waist to her curvy hips, weaving into that golden rump…!”

“…That’s all physical appearance, isn’t it?!” Kojou interrupted, unable to bear Sayaka’s starting to ramble on about Yukina’s charms any further. “There’s other things to compliment, too, aren’t there?! And you sound totally obsessed!!”

“…Besides her appearance?”

On her guard, Sayaka looked at Kojou. *This man is dangerous, indeed…*

“I suppose. Certainly there’s when I quietly slipped into Yukina’s bed and had her lingering scent all around me… Ahh, such bliss…”

“…Who compliments people on their scent?!” Kojou raised his voice, a sharp headache coming on. “I don’t mean that; talk about her personality, geez! She’s so serious, and she works so hard. She goes a surprising way for other people even though she’s shy, and she’s really strong-willed, but also has some soft spots and weaknesses and stuff…”

“N…not bad, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Sayaka looked at Kojou with a dumbfounded expression.

“To think you could compete with *me*…”

“Er, not that I’m trying to compete with you, but…”

We ain’t exactly on the same page here, thought Kojou, feeling fatigued.

“I’ll have you know, I’ve been in the bath together with Yukina!”

“Like I care!! This crazy contrarian stuff’s gettin’ on my nerves!”

“Oh, shut up! I’ve been with that girl since she was seven years old. I’ve spent a longer time with her than her actual family has, so…” As she spoke, Sayaka thrust her cell phone before Kojou, as if delighting in victory.

Displayed on the screen was an old photo showing two young girls.

Their ages were around seven or eight. There was a girl with a strong glint in her eyes and a girl with light chestnut-colored hair.

Set against a chilly backdrop in the middle of winter, the barefoot girls strongly held each other's hands, cuddling close together, as if it was the two of them against the whole world.

Looking at the picture, Kojou suddenly remembered.

Yukina had said she didn't remember her own parents.

It was probably the same for Sayaka. The Lion King Agency gathered up orphans from all over the country, raising them to be young, elite Counter-Demon Attack Mages. Sayaka had said she'd spent more time with Yukina than her real family. But to her, that also meant Yukina had been by *her* side for an equally long amount of time.

To Sayaka, having lost one family, had finally gained another one in Yukina after who knows how many months or years. Thinking of it that way, he could completely empathize with the level of love and affection Sayaka had for Yukina.

"Hmm. That's certainly cute."

Kojou looked over the picture of the girls one more time. Both Yukina and Sayaka had traces of their looks from childhood even now, he thought. They looked a little like super-deformed character mascots in the photo.

Of course, Sayaka puffed her chest out, full of satisfaction.

"I said it from the start, didn't I? My Yukina is an angel."

"Er, of course this goes for Himeragi, too, but you were quite pretty back then yourself…"

"Huh…?!"

Like a statue, Sayaka's entire body froze at Kojou's comment, made without any thought whatsoever.

Internally, Kojou had no notion that he'd said anything odd in the slightest. Certainly there were issues with her personality, but if she weren't speaking, she'd no doubt be a beautiful girl. Especially in that childhood photo, she was as

adorable as a fairy. If Yukina was an angel back then, Sayaka must surely have been one as well, he thought.

“Th-that’s…crazy…what are you…”

However, Kojou’s casual comment had caused an amusing-looking level of panic in Sayaka. She was bright red, as if her pale skin was coming to a boil; both of her shoulders trembled.

Then…

“…I really should kill you here and now!”

“What for?!”

As Sayaka suddenly drew and raised her sword, Kojou leaped back from her in a hurry. As they did so, for a moment, a powerful beam of light glimmered in the corner of their fields of vision.

Slightly after the fact, a dull exploding sound echoed through the air. In midair, an orange fireball swelled up, looking like fireworks, breaking apart into black fragments before vanishing. Finally, flame shrouded in ominous black smoke rose from the ground, high into the air.

“What was that?! It looked like a chopper got shot down…”

“An accident? Or perhaps…”

Kojou and Sayaka murmured while standing still in shock.

To shoot down a helicopter in one shot—that meant a surface-to-air missile or a similar weapon. The only kind of people who’d let something like that loose in an urban area were those one normally called terrorists.

“Maybe it’s the Black Death Emperor Front?!”

“That direction… That’s the sub-float extension under construction!”

Sayaka and Kojou shouted at the same time as both began to rush down the emergency stairs.

Yukina may have told them to meekly reflect, but if the Black Death Emperor Front was truly running amok, this was no time to loaf around.

Kojou didn’t think the helicopter crash had anything to do with the

Nalakuvera, but the Dead Black Emperor Front was a terrorist group in the first place. He couldn't reject the possibility they'd begin indiscriminate attacks on the city. He couldn't ignore this.

But just as they hurried down to the first floor of the gym, Kojou suddenly stopped. Annoyed, Sayaka tried to throw Kojou, now an obstacle in her path, out of her way.

"What is it, Kojou Akatsuki? You're in my way!"

"What's this scent…?!"

"Scent?"

As if baited by Kojou's words, Sayaka made a loud sniff. Her expression then changed to one of confusion. She, too, noticed the strange smell drifting inside the school.

"The smell of blood?!"

"No…it's similar, but this isn't blood…"

Kojou opened the nearest window and leaped into the school building. The strange smell of almost-but-not-quite blood grew only stronger. Realizing the source of the scent, Kojou sprinted, forcefully opening the clinic room door.

"…Astarte?!"

What Kojou saw there was the homunculus girl, lying on her side on the floor, covered in light crimson body fluids.

"These wounds…gunshots?! What the hell happened?!"

Sayaka ran over and pulled Astarte's clothes away to check the condition of her wounds. There were ghastly scars remaining on her body from having been pumped full of lead.

Though no longer able to move of her own volition, Astarte seemed to have barely retained consciousness. Identifying Kojou by sight, she made a frail exhale mixed with blood.

"…Report to the Fourth Primogenitor: twenty-five minutes, thirteen seconds prior to present time, a person calling himself Kristof Gardos appeared within

school grounds. He has taken Asagi Aiba, Nagisa Akatsuki, and Yukina Himeragi with him.”

“Wha…?!”

Kojou was in complete shock at the information Astarte conveyed.

Certainly, Yukina had said she was bringing Asagi to the clinic room. Nagisa had to have gone with them. But in the clinic room, only the bloodied Astarte remained. There was no sign of Yukina or the others…

“Their destination is unknown. I apologize… I was unable to protect…them…”

Astarte’s light blue eyes wavered as she spoke. A large clot of blood spilled out from her throat. She shouldn’t have been speaking in a condition like hers. It was a near miracle that she was alive at all.

“H-hey, Astarte?! Astarte, stay with me…!” Kojou desperately called out to the homunculus girl.

To the side, Sayaka began stopping Astarte’s bleeding in earnest.

3

Yukina and the others were in a cramped room with the windows covered.

Originally, it had probably been a warehouse for storing foodstuffs and the like. It was a dreary room, not furnished with even a single chair. The pipes on the ceiling were bare and exposed; the floor was slightly rusted.

Having been blindfolded when they were brought in, they didn’t know the conditions around them. The room was probably belowground. The gentle rocking of the building that they felt might have simply been from being brought by helicopter.

“Hey…where do you think this is?”

Asagi, curled up on top of an empty wooden crate, asked tentatively.

The look on her face was harder than usual, perhaps because she felt responsible for Yukina and Nagisa being abducted along with her. But that didn’t mean she was in a panic.

Taking relief in that, Yukina shook her head.

“I do not know. I believe that the helicopter flew for about ten minutes, so I do not think we could have been brought very far but…”

Watching that reaction from Yukina, Asagi narrowed her eyes in apparent suspicion.

“You’re very composed, huh? You’re not scared?”

“Eh? Ah, er…that is not so, but ah, you’re calm, too, Aiba.”

“Is that so?” Asagi murmured, looking slightly embarrassed as she glanced at the side of Nagisa’s face as she slept.

Nagisa was still out cold as she clung to Yukina’s shoulder. Asagi must have thought that Nagisa had fainted from fright at the abduction.

However, the truth was, as she was falling into a state of panic, Yukina knocked her out with a blow. Though she took no pride in her violent means, it was the only way she could protect Nagisa in that situation. She’d have been in danger of a complete mental breakdown if Yukina had left her alone like that.

Yukina felt that Nagisa’s fear toward demons was indeed abnormal. It was clearly unnatural for a resident of a Demon Sanctuary.

“…It’s because I saw Nagisa like that. I felt like, I have to keep it together, see.”

As if noticing Yukina’s misgivings, Asagi spoke with a strained smile.

“Do you know why Kojou and his family moved to Itogami Island?”

“…No.”

Yukina slowly shook her head. Kojou and his family had relocated to the Demon Sanctuary four years ago. Even the reports of the Lion King Agency did not contain the reason why. This was in spite of all immigrants to the Demon Sanctuary undergoing thorough background checks…

“I’d like you to keep this just between us.”

Asagi stood her index finger up against her lips as she lowered her gaze slightly. It was rare for her to display a frank, serious expression.

“Nagisa almost died once.”

“Eh?”

“Four years ago, she got wrapped up in a train incident involving demons. She somehow survived, but they were saying she might never regain consciousness, let alone return to a normal life…”

Asagi shook her head a little as she spoke. Yukina’s lips quivered in complete astonishment.

“But Nagisa doesn’t show the slightest sign of…”

“Yeah. I don’t know the details myself, but she’s apparently getting some kind of special treatment. This is a *Demon Sanctuary*, after all.”

Yukina fell silent at Asagi’s explanation.

The Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island was a scholarly city. Research was performed on demonic bodies and abilities on a daily basis, leading to the development of new technologies and products. And that research included top-level medical technology: experimental, unapproved medical technology.

“Her wounds are completely healed, but I expect she gets regular checkups even now; seems like it cost a lot of money, too. I think it has something to do with why, after their parents divorced, their mom doesn’t get back to the house much.”

Having said so much, Asagi made a large shrug of her shoulders. She seemed embarrassed at having spoken in such an uncharacteristically serious manner.

“So that might be why Nagisa’s afraid of demons?”

“You’d have to ask her about that, but I wouldn’t be shocked if it is.”

Yukina nodded without a word.

She felt like she understood why Kojou, having gained vampiric powers against his will, was so desperately trying to hide the fact from his little sister. The daily life they currently enjoyed couldn’t possibly continue if Nagisa learned that one of her blood relatives had become a demon himself.

Seeming concerned as Yukina fell silent, Asagi suddenly spoke in her usual, lighthearted tone of voice.

“Also, sorry. It’s my fault you’re involved in this.”

Yukina felt guilty as she shook her head. Asagi didn’t need to feel responsible for the Dead Black Emperor Front’s crimes. If anyone was responsible, it was Yukina for having been unable to protect them.

“Aiba, are you aware of why they would abduct you?”

“Nope, dunno.”

Asagi carelessly spread her arms wide as she sighed.

“It’s not like I have no clue, though. They did say they have a job for me to do.”

“A job, you say?”

Yukina parroted the words back, a blank look on her as she tilted her neck.

“I keep this secret from school,” Asagi said, sticking her tongue out a little. “I do something like part-time freelance programming, see. Sometimes what’s requested is a lot like illegal hacking. Of course, I’ve never had my arm twisted this much till now.”

“Part-time…hacking, you say?”

Yukina was more and more confused. Though Yukina was a nationally qualified Counter-Demon Attack Mage with in-depth knowledge of ritual magic, the drawback of that special education was that her knowledge of other subjects was below that of other girls in middle school. Even though she’d heard the term *hacking* before, she couldn’t picture the details in any concrete way.

“It’s a special job using computers. It’s stuff like writing custom programs, invading corporate networks, deciphering passwords…”

“…Why would the Black Death Emperor Front go out of their way to demand you do such work for them?”

With the Island Guard in pursuit, the Black Death Emperor Front was taking quite a risk abducting a mere high school girl like this. She couldn’t understand why they wanted a single programmer to the point of courting such danger.

“I think it’s strange, too. The Black Death Emperor Front’s terrorists who were causing problems in Europe a few years ago, right? I wonder what got their

attention on me.”

Asagi, using her receptionless cell phone in place of a mirror, straightened out her disheveled front locks. As she did so, she indeed looked like nothing more than an ordinary high school girl. Yukina didn’t think she was a person of such unusual ability as to catch Gardos’s eyes. But…

Suddenly, Gardos threw the door open and entered, speaking in a very soldiery voice. “…It seems you are unaware of your own fame, Miss Aiba.” Asagi sucked in her breath and turned around.

Behind Gardos, two men stood, wearing urban camouflage military uniforms. They were probably all beast men.

“At the very least, there is not a single technician in our employ who does not know your name. Of course, not even they thought that the famed Cyber Empress is such a pretty young lady.”

“Do you think transparent flattery like that is going to put me in a cooperative mood?”

Asagi spoke as she glared up at the stern Gardos, not backing down.

The aged officer made a satisfied laugh at her reaction.

“Forgive my rudeness. I do not mean this as empty flattery, but I highly value your composure and resolute attitude. Not to put down civilians who’d lose their minds in this situation, but I wouldn’t want to entrust important work to them.”

Gardos looked down at the reactionless, still-asleep Nagisa as he carried on.

Asagi made a displeased look as she got up.

“If I’m the only one you want, let these two go home first. Business can come after.”

“If you absolutely insist, then I will comply with your demands, but…”

Gardos made a gentle, strained smile.

“If you earnestly wish for these girls’ safety, I cannot support that decision.”

“What do you mean by that? I’ll have you know, if you lay even one finger on either of them…”

“We are an organized band of warriors. There is none among us who would mistreat a civilian like a common ruffian.”

Gardos’s low, resolute voice echoed, as if trying to dispel Asagi’s doubts.

Even so, Asagi glared right back into both Gardos’s eyes.

“What about the homunculus you shot in the clinic room?”

“She was a tool for combat, the same as we are.”

Speaking in a completely calm voice, Gardos lowered his eyes as if lamenting Astarte. His respectful tone of voice contrasted with his words, yet through them, one felt his unshakable convictions as a warrior.

“…I can trust you?”

“I swear upon our dead comrades and the honor of the Black Death Emperor Front.”

“Fine, then. I’ll listen to what you have to say at least. Go on, explain.”

Taking a deep breath, Asagi plopped herself atop the wooden crate.

“Hmph,” went Gardos, his lips gently curling up in satisfaction as he gave a look to his men.

His subordinates produced a ring file binding together a fairly thick bundle of documents. It looked like blueprints and a manual for electrical equipment of some kind.

“Do you recognize this?”

“—‘Souverän Nine’?! Where’d you get one of these?”

Asagi let out a shocked voice as she looked over the English-language manual.

“From someone who sympathizes with our cause. The Austrasian Army was due to purchase it before it was diverted. It is the latest model of the supercomputer series Itogami Island’s Management Corporation uses, is it not?”

“So what you’re saying is, use this to decipher the command codes for that Nalakuvera ancient weapon thingy?” Asagi murmured in a very blunt tone.

This time it was Gardos who sucked in his breath. No doubt he never imagined

an unrelated person such as Asagi would be aware of the existence of the ancient weapon known as the Nalakuvera.

“It would seem we need to raise our appraisal of you by several notches. Outstanding.”

“So you’re the ones who sent me that boring puzzle yesterday, am I right?” Asagi asked while scowling her face in displeasure. Gardos nodded solemnly.

“We sent the same e-mail to over a hundred and fifty hackers, but only eight among them were able to decipher what you call a ‘boring puzzle.’ Among them, only you produced the correct answer without any errors. Furthermore, you completed it in less than three hours, an astonishingly short time.”

“A lot was going on that day. I wanted an escape from reality.”

Speaking to herself in a pout, Asagi glanced sideways at Yukina for some reason. Yukina blinked her eyes with a bewildered feeling, averting her eyes out of some vague sense of guilt.

Gardos paid no heed as he continued to speak.

“Our objectives are the immediate destruction of that accursed Holy Ground Treaty and the obliteration of the First Primogenitor, betrayer of all demonkind. The power of the Nalakuvera is necessary for the realization of our goals.”

“There’s no way I’d cooperate after hearing that, is there? If you succeed with a plan like that, worst case, it’d plunge the whole world into war!” Asagi shouted as she slammed the manual onto the floor. A laugh rolled off of Gardos’s lips.

“*That* is the world we yearn for…but certainly, this conflicts very much with your values. Yet even so…no, *because it is so*, I trust that you will cooperate with us.”

“Huh? What are you saying? There’s no way I’d…”

“Do you know what this is?”

As Gardos spoke, one of his men took out a thin tablet PC.

The screen displayed a strangely long line of text. Though it looked like a spell, it didn’t fall under any of the magic rituals Yukina was aware of. But she did not think it was any meaningless sentence.

It seemed to be a complicated formula broken down into a form that humans could pronounce. Asagi gazed upon it with a sour look.

“The puzzle I deciphered…the command codes for the ancient weapon, huh? But isn’t it just one piece of a larger puzzle?”

“That is correct. There were a total of fifty-four stone tablets excavated along with the Nalakuvera. This was but a single one among them. But you remember what was on this one, don’t you?”

“You can’t…mean that…”

Hearing Gardos’s words, Asagi’s face turned pale.

The terrorist from the Warlord’s Empire looked very pleased as he made a glacial smile.

“That’s right. That stone tablet’s title is ‘The First Words’—the Nalakuvera’s *start-up command*.”

4

His back resting against the wall of the clinic room, Kojou trembled. Even though he’d been calling Asagi and the others by cell phone, all he got was a voice message saying they were outside school grounds.

Apparently the report was right—they really had been abducted by the Black Death Emperor Front.

But Kojou couldn’t understand the reason why. Certainly, Yukina was after the Dead Black Emperor Front, but that was no reason to abduct her. All the more with Asagi and Nagisa, who shouldn’t be related to the Black Death Emperor Front in even the slightest way…

“Wait…”

There was one thing, and only one, that tied the girls together. Kojou ground his teeth as he remembered.

The Nalakuvera. Kojou had asked Asagi to look into the smuggled ancient weapon, but for some reason, she seemed to already know the name. Also, she’d

been drawn to the stone tablet that showed how to control the Nalakuvera.

Kojou was well aware of Asagi's skill as a password cracker. If the Black Death Emperor Front figured they could use her skills to decipher the stone tablet…

"Kojou Akatsuki, haven't they dispatched an ambulance yet—?!"

Sayaka's urgent voice interrupted Kojou's train of thought.

She was in the middle of giving the gravely wounded Astarte first aid.

"They dispatched an ambulance, but looks like it's not gonna arrive right away."

"Why not?!"

"Dunno. But I figure it has something to do with that helicopter crash. Maybe they're running short, maybe the road's blocked?"

"I see…so that's it…"

Sayaka bit her lip in apparent anguish.

"She won't hold on at this rate. If I don't stop the fluid leakage at least…"

"Stop the bleeding you mean? But…"

Kojou pulled back on the verge of saying, *Can you even do that?*

Astarte's gunshot wounds were on a level that would have instantly killed a normal person. Even with a powerful man-made Beast Vassal dwelling within her body, Astarte was not a homunculus tuned for combat. Her physical durability was likely on par with a normal person's.

"It's all right. I'll take care of it. You bring over antiseptic and bandages."

Saying those words in a tone that thrust aside all doubt, Sayaka took something out from the cuff of her uniform. It was a metallic needle about fifteen centimeters long, so thin that the naked eye could barely make it out.

"Nervous system mapping is Type One—Standard Humanoid. This should work…"

As Sayaka murmured under her breath, she plunged the needle into Astarte's back.

“Kirasaka?!”

“Don’t worry. It’s like acupuncture. It’s putting her into a coma and maintaining her vitals at a bare minimum. This should stop the bleeding and minimize cellular and brain damage.”

“…Acupuncture…you can do that?”

Kojou looked at Sayaka’s delicate fingertips in bewilderment. Certainly she was the only one he could rely on in this situation, but…

Then, Sayaka made a hearty laugh, seemingly meant for her as much as for him.

“I told you, Lion King Agency Shamanic War Dancers are specialists in curses and assassination, right? It’s my mission to control whether someone lives or dies. I absolutely won’t let a girl who helped Yukina die right before my eyes!”

A frighteningly serious expression came over Sayaka’s face as she spoke.

Kojou’s eyes were stolen by the sight of her. He felt that Sayaka, as she continued to treat Astarte’s fresh bleeding, was somehow sublime, even beautiful. Shamanic War Dancer—in other words, a dancing priestess. No doubt that just like Yukina, she was a spiritualist through whom the voices of the gods reverberated, seeing and knowing all.

“…I have a suggestion, Fourth Primogenitor…”

The powerless homunculus girl, still on the floor, called out to Kojou in a voice that threatened to disappear. Kojou brought his ear close to her lips.

“Astarte?”

“Master is…currently…en route to the Black Dead Emperor Front’s hiding place…to apprehend them…I believe Asagi Aiba and the others abducted by Kristof Gardos were headed to that same Black Death Emperor Front’s hideout…”

“…So Asagi and the rest might be being held right where Natsuki’s going?”

“Affirmative.”

Having conveyed all the information she needed to, an expression of relief

came over Astarte as she closed her eyes. She then lost consciousness completely. She entered a deep, deathlike sleep. However…

“She’s probably going to be all right. Hospitals in a Demon Sanctuary should have homunculus tuning vats, and girls like her don’t have to worry about organ rejection.”

Sayaka spoke while slumping down to the floor. A satisfied smile came over her lips.

“I see. You really saved the day, Kirasaka. Thanks for coming.”

As Kojou exhaled in relief, he offered his hand to Sayaka. She took his hand and got up.

“Er, yeah. Thanks… Er, not that I was doing this for you, of course!”

Suddenly regaining her senses, Sayaka violently shook free of Kojou’s hand.

“That hurt. The heck’s up with you?”

“Nothing at all. Go die already…sheesh.”

Spitting her words behind her, Sayaka headed toward the clinic room’s lavatory, washing off her bloodstained hands.

In the meantime, Kojou tried using his cell phone one more time. It was a call to Natsuki’s number. But…

“…Figures there’s no signal! Shit, even if Natsuki knows where the terrorist hideout is, if I don’t know where *she* is, it doesn’t mean a thing!”

As the cell call refused to connect, Kojou promptly gave up, making an exasperated sigh.

If Natsuki was heading toward the Black Death Emperor Front hideout like Astarte said, there had to be combat taking place. There was a high probability Asagi and the others would be caught up in the fighting. He had to hook up with Natsuki and tell her about the abduction before that happened.

But Kojou had no way of figuring out where Natsuki was at the moment…

“Kojou Akatsuki. The homunculus said her master was heading to apprehend the Black Death Emperor Front, yes?”

Sayaka returned from washing the artificial plasma off her, stripping off her stained summer sweater as she spoke.

“Yeah.”

“Then there will be fierce combat.”

“I know. That’s why I’m so nervous.” Kojou replied with irritation. Sayaka looked at Kojou like he was a complete idiot. She spoke as if she was a famous sleuth teasing a clueless detective.

“So. Question: Where is there fierce combat taking place on this island, *right now*?”

“Ah…”

Where was a fierce battle taking place, like a helicopter being hit by a surface-to-air missile and crashing?

Kojou clapped his hands together as he recalled the location.

5

Itogami Island was fundamentally made up of four Gigafloats—East, West, South, North—but the island also had numerous smaller extension units all around it.

They fulfilled various functions, such as floating crude oil depositories, dry docks for repairing ships, or even serve as a giant Dumpster for the storing of nonflammable waste. The buildings on Itogami Island’s Sub-float No. 13 constituted one such landfill facility.

“—Sorry about this, but I can’t go any farther. The police have sealed the road.”

The taxi driver stopped the car before they reached a sub-float connected to the coastline.

The passengers in back, Kojou and Sayaka, leaned forward and looked over the scene before them.

A fan-shaped piece of land with a radius of some five kilometers jutted out into

the sea.

It was a wide, flat, empty space suggesting a landfill still under construction. The only identifiable difference with a landfill was the presence of thick steel plates covering the entire surface.

Certainly, there was a yellow-and-black barricade placed on the bridge connecting to the sub-float. Kojou could see patrol cars with red lights flashing, too.

“This is just a rumor I heard from other taxi drivers, but I hear they found internationally wanted terrorists up ahead. Hey, you heard that noise just now? That’s gunfire. I know that sound pretty well from my time in the Shimabara Civil Conflict Zone before I got this job.”

As the driver spoke, he shrugged his shoulders as they heard intermittent crackling sounds through the windows.

Sayaka murmured, “Ah, I see,” and nodded appropriately.

“Understood. Thank you. We’ll get off here.”

“Sure. That’ll be eight hundred and ninety yen.”

The cabbie made no special effort to stop Kojou and Sayaka, casually demanding only his fee.

They were a pair of male and female high schoolers smelling distinctly of blood, carrying a suspicious musical instrument case with them. It wasn’t surprising he wouldn’t want to be involved, but…

“You heard him, Kojou Akatsuki. Pay the man.”

“The heck?! You get money from the Lion King Agency, too, don’t you?! Just call it an expense.”

“I don’t have my wallet on me. You’re a primogenitor, you can pay that much. Oh, and die already.”

“Like I’ll just die! Don’t call a taxi if you don’t have a wallet!!”

Complaining all the while, Kojou was forced to pay the cab fare. For Kojou, living on a high schooler’s meager budget, even this fee was a lot of money.

Thanks to this extravagance, they'd greatly shortened up their travel time. After leaving school, it'd taken them about fifteen minutes to get this far. The wreckage of the crashed helicopter was still burning at the farthest tip of the broad sub-float. And even now, a gunfight continued within the white smoke hanging over the area.

"It really is a war out there, geez…"

Kojou groaned with irritation and frustration while listening to the ceaseless gunfire.

The under-construction sub-float had cranes and watchtowers standing around like decrepit trees. The largest watchtower among them was a cylindrical building about five stories tall.

A number of thickly armored trucks had that watchtower surrounded.

Island Guard mechanized troops sheltered in the shadows of the armored trucks as they blind-fired small arms. Each time they did so, return fire came from the watchtower side; the fierce firefight had descended into a complete stalemate.

There was armored truck wreckage strewn all around the watchtower; the casualties were not small in number. It was a war of attrition, like wading through a swamp. It didn't feel like anything civilians like Kojou and Sayaka should be poking their faces into.

"Looks like the terrorists are defending that place," said Sayaka, coolly assessing the combat situation.

"Defending? In a place like that?"

Kojou shifted his gaze to her with a doubtful look.

There was nothing for the Black Death Emperor Front to gain from defending a place where they could expect no support from allies and had limited weapons and ammunition. He didn't think Gardos, who'd gone to a military academy, would choose such a foolish strategy.

But Sayaka pointed to the still-burning helicopter wreckage.

"I wonder if they weren't planning to use that to escape. But the Island Guard

shot the helicopter down, so they've lost the means to run."

"So they have no choice but to do this, you're saying."

Kojou made an "mmm" through his nose. Sayaka's explanation made sense on the surface, he thought. Criminals on the lam tended to hole up in any building close at hand.

But though he couldn't put it cleanly into words, Kojou still had a strange unease inside of him.

"Landing a chopper in plain sight like this is practically begging people to shoot it down, isn't it…?"

"Eh?"

"Er, nothing. Anyway, if the Black Death Emperor Front has nowhere to run, it's possible they'd use Himeragi and the others as hostages?"

"H-hostages…"

That moment, Sayaka's small face flushed with an agitated sound coming from her. *That's not good,* Kojou thought, clicking his tongue. Thanks to Kojou's carelessly tossed word, Sayaka had completely lost her cool.

Without hesitation, Sayaka drew her sword out of the keyboard case she was carrying.

"Yukina…I have to…I have to go save her…"

"Calm down, Kirasaka! The Island Guard has the entrance sealed off. If we go barging in, they'll arrest us in no time!"

Kojou pinned Sayaka's arms from behind while shouting into her ear.

Sayaka struggled with both arms and legs.

"I-I understand that, geez! Can't you do something?!"

"Whaddaya mean, *something*?"

"Spells, spells. Charm the policemen with an evil eye, transform into mist to slip past them, fly in the sky, stuff like that."

"I don't have any superhuman skills like that!"

“Huh?! You’re a vampire primogenitor, aren’t you?”

Sayaka looked back in shock at Kojou’s entirely frank confession.

“I told you, I was a normal human being until just lately!”

“Beast Vassals?! Don’t you have any abilities you can use from the Fourth Primogenitor’s twelve Beast Vassals?”

She gave Kojou such an expectant look that he was hesitant to reply, as if intimidated by it.

“No, I’ve…only got one Beast Vassal that’ll listen to me properly right now. That live wire finally recognized me as its master when I sucked on Himeragi’s blood a little while back.”

“What…?!”

Strength surged into the left hand that held Sayaka’s sword.

“You mean *that’s* what Duke Ardeal meant when he said spirit medium…?! So Yukina let you suck her blood so that the Beast Vassal wouldn’t go berserk? Then what was the Beast Vassal you used on the rooftop back there…?”

“I didn’t *use* it. One of ’em tried to come out all on its own.”

“On its own…?”

Dejected, Sayaka staggered back as if having a dizzy spell.

Finally, as if deciding on something, she knitted her beautiful eyebrows and glared at the policemen blocking her path.

“I understand quite well that I can’t rely on you. I’ll have to do this myself…”

“Wait, wait! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Kojou rushed to block Sayaka’s path as a bloodcurdling expression came across her face.

“It’s all right, I won’t be a klutz and leave evidence.”

“I’m not talking about that! Aw, crap. The important thing is we just have to get to the sub-float over there, right?!”

“…What do you intend to do?”

As Kojou rephrased the situation, Sayaka shot him an uneasy look.

Kojou put the guitar case containing the spear over his back and briskly circled Sayaka's flank.

"Sorry, don't move for a sec, 'kay?"

"Eh? What are y…*yaah*?!"

Sayaka's whole body virtually froze at her shock from being lifted up into a bridal carry.

In the meantime, Kojou made a small bite into his own lip. He used the taste of blood swirling in his mouth as the trigger to unleash his vampiric strength. Clutching Sayaka all the while, he ran toward the sub-float.

The only thing the police had sealed off was the bridge connecting the sub-float to the island. In other words, they could get across from anywhere, *as long as they didn't use the bridge*.

The distance between it and Itogami Island proper was about eight meters. Even a normal human being could leap that distance with a running start…if he was an Olympic track and field athlete.

With the aid of a vampire's strength, he should have had ability to spare even with some added baggage…or so he thought.

"…Whoa?! Huh, that was closer than I figured."

Landing just over the edge of the sub-float's cliff, Kojou made a ragged exhale. One step short and any misstep would have put them in danger of falling right into the sea.

Perhaps it was indeed difficult to make such a leap while carrying another person, even with the strength of a vampire. Or perhaps Sayaka was heavier than she looked… Just as Kojou had that rude thought…

"Wh-wh-wh…what do you think you're doing?!"

Sayaka suddenly went wild in Kojou's arms.

"We got across, didn't we? Didn't have to hurt any policemen, either…"

"This doesn't count! This doesn't count, you hear me?!"

Sayaka pounded Kojou's head while saying seemingly meaningless words. It really must have gotten to her; the punches were far more timid than one would expect from a Counter-Demon Attack Mage.

"What the heck are you talkin' about? And don't move around like that, we'll fall into the ocean!"

"Shut up, be quiet! Burn to ash!"

"Ow?! Hey, you, quit with the sword, that ain't funny!"

For some reason, Sayaka had tears in her eyes as she swung her sword. Kojou instantly dodged it, but fell down then and there with Sayaka still in his arms, ending up pinning Sayaka to the ground.

With Sayaka not ceasing her attacks even then, Kojou somehow managed to pin both of her arms down.

"…What are you two doing?"

Suddenly, a mass of frills suddenly appeared before Kojou and Sayaka's eyes, seemingly walking out of thin air.

She had an expensive-looking parasol and an overly adorned black dress; Kojou knew only one person who would wear an outfit like *that* amid Itogami Island's never-ending summer.

"Natsuki? Weren't you taking on the terrorists?"

"I have to let the Island Guard people get the glory some of the time. It seems the assault team has the Black Death Emperor Front survivors on their heels, so they don't need the help." Natsuki replied while giving the continuing firefight at the watchtower a long look. So the Black Death Emperor Front was holed up inside there, just as Kojou and Sayaka had deduced.

"So, why is this mouth calling me Natsuki?"

"Ow, ow, ow, stop that…"

Natsuki twisted the unresisting Kojou's cheek, hard. Kojou's arms were unavailable, busy as they were keeping Sayaka pinned down.

"It isn't the time for this…Himeragi and the others have been kidnapped and

might be host—”

Even so, Kojou spoke in a desperate tone, as if to convey the gravity of the matter.

It was the next moment that the fierce sound of gunfire abruptly ceased.

Kojou and the others lifted their head at the strange silence that had suddenly descended.

Roaaaaaaaaar—

A great roar, like a bomb detonating, rang in the ears of the people there.

As the roar echoed in midair over the sub-float, the ground shook violently, as if during an earthquake.

The origin point of the roaring sound was the watchtower the Black Death Emperor Front had been holed up in. The steel-frame tower was enveloped in flames; the Island Guard personnel surrounding the watchtower put their heads down to avoid the flying debris.

“The heck was that explosion?! Is this from the Island Guard’s assault, too?”

The flame-enveloped watchtower continued to break apart. Kojou was in shock as he gazed at the seemingly unreal sight.

Natsuki continued to hold Kojou’s twisted cheek as she shook her head.

“No…suicide, perhaps?”

“Suicide…?”

A group of bestialized terrorists seemed to have escaped the smoke-wrapped watchtower. But many of them were caught in the tower’s collapse. If they were responsible for the explosion, certainly the sight looked like nothing other than suicide, but…

“What’s…this presence…?!”

Sayaka thrust away the bent-over Kojou and leaped to her feet.

She was looking at the base of the destroyed watchtower. There was something gigantic moving out of the huge pile of debris falling all over the place.

Titanic magical energy gushed out from the depths of the earth. The aura felt very dense, strangely artificial, and somehow bizarrely twisted.

“Hmm, I’m not really sure, but this might be…bad?”

Kojou and the others, overwhelmed by the bizarre sight, heard a sarcastic laugh from behind them.

As Kojou turned, he saw a handsome blond young man wearing a white three-piece suit…

“Vattler?! Why are you here, too?!”

“What are you doing here?!”

Looking back at the grinning Dimitrie Vattler, Kojou and Sayaka raised their voices simultaneously.

Natsuki raised an eyebrow with displeasure as well.

“What do you want, Master of Serpents?”

“My, my, let’s leave the long talk for later. You might want to have your unit pull back first. At any rate, Gardos is not here. The group left a simple decoy.”

As Vattler pulled his sunglasses slightly ajar, his beautiful blue eyes narrowed teasingly.

Natsuki’s beautiful cherubic face twisted as she glared at him.

“Decoy? What do they gain by gathering the Island Guard to a place like this?”

“Of course, it is necessary for their objective, a test of their newly obtained weapon. Surely you have not forgotten what the Black Death Emperor Front brought to this island?”

“…The weapon?!”

That instant, a frigid expression came over Natsuki.

The doubts that had been swirling in the back of Kojou’s mind suddenly came into sharp relief.

A standoff with no hope of victory; a helicopter shot down, just like that—perhaps the Black Death Emperor Front’s objective was to draw the Island

Guard’s mechanized force members so that they could be destroyed.

Which meant, what was hidden in the hollow cavity under the sub-float was…

“—The Nalakuvera?!”

As if responding to Kojou’s call, a giant silhouette scattered the debris as it emerged.

Then Kojou saw a crimson beam of light sweeping across the ground. The beam ripped the armored trucks apart with ease, as if they were made out of flimsy paper. They exploded with ferocious flames, pieces scattering in all directions.

6

Kristof Gardos watched the explosion in real time via a live feed over the network. He turned to a military radio microphone and inquired in a voice filled with satisfaction.

“Status report, Grigore.”

“This is Grigore. Bingo, Lieutenant Colonel. The guinea pig is on the move.”

His subordinate, riding aboard the Nalakuvera, shouted in a tone of voice tinged with excitement.

Called a weapon of the gods, the true nature of the Nalakuvera was a sentient, mechanical beast.

Once activated, it would act on its own judgment to autonomously attack and annihilate all who opposed it.

A controller could issue it commands, but the Nalakuvera’s controller had to use special verbal command codes to do so. Only those who could decipher the words of the gods could make the weapon of the gods obey them.

“Can you continue combat?”

“This is a child’s play. All I’m doing is sitting back and watching. I don’t know how long the island can hold up to the pounding, though.”

Once he spoke, Grigore made a ferocious laugh.

Either way, the only command code they possessed was “The First Words” Asagi had deciphered. With the Nalakuvera now in motion, no mortal could stop it.

“Roger that, Grigore.”

Gardos cut the transmission and slowly turned in Asagi’s direction.

Asagi had a seemingly tranquil look on her face as she looked at the image displayed on her tablet PC.

Every time the Nalakuvera unleashed its beam, the resulting giant explosion shook the sub-float. Armored trucks were burning. Island Guard personnel were running for their lives. This tragedy had come as a result of the command code Asagi had analyzed. Surely that fact had affected her deeply.

“…So that’s how it is. Do you still have any questions?”

Gardos asked as he gazed at the expressionless Asagi and the others.

As Asagi remained silent, Yukina asked in her place.

“Why?”

“…Why?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I believe I already explained our objectives?”

“No, that is not what I mean; rather, why is the Duke of Ardeal cooperating with you?”

Gardos raised his eyebrow a little. His gray eyes registered a faint bit of surprise.

“I see. I did not recognize you due to the different outfit, but you were the one accompanying the Fourth Primogenitor that night.”

“This is inside the *Oceanus Grave*, isn’t it?”

Yukina let out a light sigh as she nodded.

Yukina, too, had been late in realizing: the large, old man with a scar on his

forehead; the look of intelligence that did not match the ghoulish oppressive sensation; Vattler's steward, serving as a waiter on the night Vattler had invited Kojou…

The man they'd been searching for had been right under their noses from the start.

"So the reason the people of the Island Guard couldn't find the Black Death Emperor Front's hideout was because it was inside a ship protected by diplomatic immunity…isn't it?"

"There seems to be no point hiding it now."

Gardos made a curt murmur, apparently ordering his men to open the windows.

They opened the shutter-sealed windows…revealing the vast surface of the ocean, glittering in the sunlight. They saw the artificial silhouette of Itogami Island floating on the horizon.

Yukina and the others had to be ten kilometers or so off the coast.

"Inside…a ship…" Asagi weakly raised her voice, narrowing her eyes at the dazzling rays of the sun.

"This is the personal cruiser of Duke Ardeal of the Warlord's Empire," Gardos explained rather casually. The visit of a noble from the Warlord's Empire had even been broadcast to the general public. As the handsome Vattler was a hot topic on talk shows, even Asagi had to have heard of him.

"So, why?"

Yukina asked the same question again.

"The Black Death Emperor Front is a beast-man supremacist organization. You and Duke Ardeal, a noble of the Warlord's Empire, should be enemies, all the more so because he was the mastermind behind the assassination of your leader, the Black Death Emperor…"

"Yes. That is why even the Demon Sanctuary's security forces never suspected this ship."

Gardos was expressionless, stating it without any special sense of triumph.

“About half of this ship’s crew are survivors of the Black Death Emperor Front. But appearances aside, Vattler is nobility. He’d never bother to look into the backgrounds of the people crewing his own ship. He leaves that responsibility to the ship’s crew management company, in other words…”

Yukina scowled her eyebrows in displeasure.

“Surely you’re not asserting Duke Ardeal knew nothing of this. What benefit does all this bring to him?”

“Though I do not deign to know the thinking of an unaging vampire, I imagine it’s probably boredom.”

“…Boredom?”

“Yes. That is why he wishes to fight the Nalakuvera, the weapon of the gods that might be able to defeat even a primogenitor: a splendid playmate for a vampire with too much time on his hands. Should the Fourth Primogenitor battle the Nalakuvera first, he can enjoy the view. However, it turns out, he certainly won’t be bored.”

“That’s…”

Yukina felt a surge of bewilderment and anger at Vattler’s deviant thought process. For a temporary relief from tedium, he’d go as far as using and sheltering terrorists after his own life. It wasn’t the conduct of a sane man.

As if agreeing with Yukina’s thoughts, an expression of loathing came over Gardos’s face.

“We do not have such poor tastes. But the Black Death Emperor Front requires the power to defeat a primogenitor either way. Vattler, said to be the man closest to a primogenitor in might, is an excellent opponent to test the Nalakuvera’s power against. We both want this battle to take place; in this instance, our interests completely coincide.”

“…You’ve resurrected that monster for a trivial reason like that? All of Itogami Island could be destroyed…!”

“If tens of thousands of the humans who built this cage they call a ‘Demon Sanctuary’ and their tame, hand-fed demon pets are killed, we will feel not one

shred of guilt.”

Gardos spoke in a tone devoid of emotion.

“Of course, we do not desire meaningless slaughter. Our primary objective is the destruction of our target, Vattler. We will minimize the damage to the city as much as possible…if we can completely control the Nalakuvera, that is.”

“Meaning, hand over the deciphered command codes if you don’t want Itogami Island turned to ash?”

Having kept silent all this time, Asagi shot a venomous look at Gardos.

The corners of Gardos’s lips turned up in a smile.

The Nalakuvera had already been activated. The only way to stop the indiscriminate destruction was for Asagi to decipher the command codes, knowing full well that the Black Death Emperor Front would be able to use the Nalakuvera as it wished as a direct consequence.

“That’s low. You really are a terrorist.”

“The Souverän Nine is inside. All the necessary data has been made available; it has full network access, so use it however you like.”

“I don’t have a choice either way. Fine, then. But this is going to cost you dearly.”

Without paying the slightest attention to Asagi’s abusive language, Gardos headed out of the room, taking his men with him.

Finally, he looked back at Asagi for just a moment.

“It is not that I doubt your skill, but you should hurry as much as possible. It will be inconvenient for both of us should the island sink before we get those command codes.”

“I’m doing this for me, not for you…!”

As Asagi shouted, drenched in loathing, she violently kicked open the room’s inner door.

It was a cold room for the preservation of fresh fish. However, the spartan room contained neither fish nor fresh meat, but rather, rack-mounted high-

performance computing servers—in other words, a supercomputer. With wild abandon, Asagi stormed into the air-chilled room being used to keep the circuits from running too hot. That moment, a voice came to her from an unexpected direction.

"…Do not be impatient, young woman."

A clear, cool voice flowed from the lips of Nagisa, who should have been soundly asleep.

Asagi turned around, drawn in by the somehow odd reverberation of the voice.

Nagisa's tied-up hair was now loose, flowing down almost all the way to her hips. Her eyes, with her irises opened wide, projected no emotion, like the surface of a calm pool of water. Her lips formed a smile all by themselves.

"Do not permit your mind to be troubled. With that contraption's capabilities, it shall not take you very long to decipher a single document from a long-dead civilization."

"Nagisa, is that you…?"

Bewildered, Asagi called out to Nagisa, who felt like a completely different person than her usual self.

Yukina shook her head with a look of surprise.

"No, it is not… This condition is…divine possession? Or a spirit…?"

"*Ho-ho*, I see. So *you, too, are a shrine maiden*, Sword Shaman of the Lion King."

Nagisa made a smile of apparent pleasure as she spoke. Deeply disturbed, Yukina stared at her, as if trying to assess the situation.

"Then, you must understand as well. Even without your concern, that boy shall buy you time—time for that young woman to move forward with her plan."

"Who…are you…?!" Yukina sharply narrowed her eyes as she asked in return. However, Nagisa did not respond in any way. Without another word, her eyelids gently closed, collapsing like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

"What was that? Who was that?"

Yukina held her tongue and shook her head at Asagi's questions.

Even Yukina could not explain Nagisa's abnormal behavior. She had clearly witnessed something greater than a human being taking the girl over. Perhaps it was divine possession; could also have been a latent personality buried deep within Nagisa's psyche. Perhaps it had something to do with the injuries she'd sustained that had never been written in the Lion King Agency's report…but at any rate, this wasn't the time or place to look into it.

Yukina slapped her cheeks and rose, as if forcing her emotions to switch gears.

"Aiba. May I borrow your cell phone?"

"Sure, but what are you planning?"

Asagi tossed her light pink smartphone to Yukina. She'd be able to get a cell signal now that the ship was getting close to Itogami Island.

"Sorry. I had a bad premonition, so I'm a little uneasy…"

Slowed down because she was using an unfamiliar cell phone, Yukina dialed a phone number she'd memorized.

The mysterious personality that'd possessed Nagisa had jogged her memory.

Yes, Kojou Akatsuki was probably trying to halt the Nalakuvera's onslaught.

Even if he didn't personally wish for it to be so, him being him, it was highly likely he'd be wrapped up in it anyhow.

Without Kojou being aware of it, the all-too-overwhelming power of the Fourth Primogenitor had distorted fate, drawing him to the field of battle. The teenage boy was truly a trouble magnet; one couldn't take their eyes off him for a second.

But that was probably the very reason he'd protect that city.

However, that certainty made Yukina all the more uneasy. The Nalakuvera was a weapon brought back to life to fight primogenitors. On his own, as his power stood now, Kojou might not be able to defeat the ancient weapon.

He needed power. It was a situation Yukina hadn't wanted to think about, but there was something she needed to tell Kojou Akatsuki before a truly worst-case

situation presented itself.

“You’d think Sayaka would be the last person to end up entangled with senpai, but…”

As Yukina murmured, she put the cell phone to her ear. As the call connected, she heard Kojou’s voice.

7

Gazing at the crimson beams scattered about, Vattler clapped in acclamation. He looked like he was truly enjoying himself.

“So that is the Nalakuvera’s ‘flame-spitting lance’? Well, well, quite some power to it, yes?”

Depressed at the sight of Vattler, Kojou kicked the ground in frustration.

“Ah, shit. The heck are you doing here? What about your precious ship?!”

“Ahh, that. Actually, the *Oceanus Grave* has been hijacked.”

Vattler said it in an aloof tone. Kojou’s mouth dropped open.

“Hijacked?!”

“Yes, yes. So, I came here fleeing for my life, you see.”

Liar! Kojou shouted inside his mind. As if mere terrorists could hijack a ship from him.

If it was true, there was only one possibility he could think of: Vattler had merrily handed his ship over to the Black Death Emperor Front of his own volition.

“I see. So Gardos and his men were brought to Itogami Island on *your* ship…”

Natsuki thrust a black folding fan toward Vattler as if wielding a knife.

A transparently fake look of melancholy came over his face.

“No, really. I was quite surprised. To think that terrorists were mixed in with the crew of my own ship…”

“So you intend to play the good victim? Well, you’ve been that kind of man since way back.”

Natsuki made a very deep exhale, abandoning pushing the matter any further.

“It’s really quite embarrassing,” said Vattler with a laugh. “Ah, come to mention it, I picked this up on the way as I was fleeing.”

Like old rags, he made a small toss, discarding something at his feet.

A schoolboy wearing a high school uniform made a squishy sound as he rolled. He looked like he’d drowned in the ocean; his face couldn’t be identified due to the seaweed covering his whole body.

But Kojou recognized the short, spiky hair and the headphones down around his neck.

“Y-Yaze?!”

“Ah, could this be an acquaintance of yours?”

Vattler smiled in apparent pleasure as he watched Kojou’s shocked reaction.

Yaze was out cold, but he didn’t seem in any mortal danger. Thanks to having lost consciousness before falling into the ocean, he didn’t seem to have swallowed any seawater.

What the heck’s he been up to, Kojou wondered, feeling fatigued as he shook his head.

“Now, then. Well, you can rest easy. I will take responsibility and destroy the Nalakuvera.” Vattler took the opportunity to make a declaration in a lively voice.

“Rest easy my ass!! You wanted to rumble against that thing from the beginning, didn’t you?!” Kojou roared as he finally realized what Vattler was up to.

It was a moment later when Kojou’s cell phone rang in response to an incoming call.

“Aw, shit. Who is it at a time like th—”

Complaining all the while, Kojou took out his cell phone, sucking in his breath when he saw the caller ID displayed.

“Asagi?!”

“…It’s me, senpai.”

After Kojou shouted forcefully, his ear detected a dissatisfied-sounding sigh from Yukina.

“Eh?! Himeragi?”

A sudden, unexpected assault threw Kojou off-balance.

“Yukina, are you all right?! Where are you now?!”

Sayaka pressed her face against Kojou’s ear as she shouted.

Unsurprisingly, she was quick off the starting block where Yukina was concerned. On the other hand, she apparently hadn’t noticed that she was in an extremely intimate position against Kojou. Sayaka’s breaths were tickling his cheek.

“I’m all right,” Yukina replied in her usual, overly serious tone of voice.

“Right now we’re inside the *Oceanus Grave*. At present, neither Aiba nor Nagisa have been harmed.”

“I see. For the time being, it’s a lot safer over there than here with us.”

Kojou was so relieved that it drained him, and he allowed his thoughts to slip, self-derision and all.

“So you are indeed close to the Nalakuvera.”

“Y-yeah.”

“Sticking your nose into another dangerous place on your own…you really should realize what a dangerous person you are, senpai. Did something happen between you and Sayaka?”

“Er, well, never mind that, we never thought they’d bring *that* thing out…”

“W-we heard that you and the others had been kidnapped, and I was worried…”

Scolded by the clearly unhappy Yukina, Kojou and Sayaka continued making painful-sounding excuses.

But Yukina cut them off midway.

“But it’s good that you did. Senpai, please slow the Nalakuvera down so that it does not approach the city itself.”

“…Slow it down?”

“Yes. Right now, Aiba is deciphering the Nalakuvera’s command codes. When she is finished, the current indiscriminate rampage can be stopped, you see.”

“Asagi’s…… I see, so that’s what it is…”

Kojou made a solemn nod.

He didn’t know the fine details, but he had a pretty good idea what situation Yukina and the others were in.

As Kojou had expected, the Black Death Emperor Front was using Asagi to decipher the ancient weapon’s command codes. Asagi was searching for the commands to stop the rampage; in other words, the terrorists couldn’t control the Nalakuvera, either.

“…Slowing it down is plenty. Please do not try too hard to destroy it and increase the devastation further. Now, Sayaka…”

“What? If there’s something I can do, say it!”

As Yukina called her name, Sayaka’s voice leaped out as she kept her ear pressed to the phone.

But Yukina brushed her off with a chilly voice.

“Please move back a little. I want to speak with Akatsuki-senpai alone.”

“Eh? Ehh?!”

Looking like she was about to break into tears, Sayaka reeled backward, squatting and hugging her knees then and there. Kojou felt some sympathy for her as he shook his head at the sight.

“…Speak about what, Himeragi?”

“There’s no time so I’ll be brief.”

Yukina audibly cleared her throat. She started over, asking her question in an

urgent tone.

“Senpai, do you think a second Beast Vassal might be necessary?”

“Second Beast Vassal?” Kojou swallowed as Yukina’s question got right to the point.

Taming a Beast Vassal required blood, just like when Kojou had sucked on Yukina’s blood to bring Regulus Aurum under his control—blood of a quality high enough to satisfy the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Kojou’s voice went shrill as he imagined what would be required to obtain it.

“N-no, I don’t think so. I haven’t thought about that for one moment!”

“I see. If that is so, good and well, but actually…”

Yukina continued, “About Sayaka,” lowering her voice to a whisper.

“…Eh?!”

When Kojou finished listening to Yukina, he bit his lip in silence for a while. For brief, fragmentary information to have shut Kojou up like that meant it was quite outside his expectations.

Her back still curled, Sayaka looked up at Kojou in silence, resentment in her eyes.

Kojou, having somehow regained his composure, shook his head as if getting the cobwebs out.

“Got it. Leave it to me. I’ll slow it down one way or another.”

“Understood. Be careful, senpai.”

With that, the call ended. Kojou looked toward the destroyed watchtower as he thrust the phone into a pocket.

The Nalakuvera, still buried in rubble, wasn’t moving. It had no doubt destroyed the Island Guard’s mechanized platoon to dispose of the most pressing threat before it.

But that did not mean in any way that the crisis had passed.

Something like an eyeball on the Nalakuvera’s head continued ceaselessly

scanning the area. It was gathering information on what targets it should move to eliminate. At the slightest provocation, the Nalakuvera would resume combat; there was little doubt that this time, it would put Itogami Island to the torch.

“How’s the Island Guard retreat going?”

Vattler smoothly made an instant reply to Kojou’s question. “They just made it outside the sub-float. The number of casualties is less than I expected.”

Why are you answering that? Kojou thought, glaring at him. If he was observing the entire area, he surely knew exactly when combat would begin anew. But…

“Got it. I’ll take it on, then. The captured girls are in your hands, Natsuki.”

Without asking anyone’s opinion, Kojou so declared.

Natsuki twisted her elegant parasol, glaring at Kojou with a sour look. Perhaps she was angry at his arbitrary declaration; perhaps she simply didn’t like the way Kojou casually spoke her given name. But—for once—she voiced no complaint whatsoever. That must have meant she was tentatively on board.

“Do you not think stealing someone else’s prey is poor manners, Kojou Akatsuki?”

For his part, Vattler made that mild objection. However, Kojou wasn’t taking the bait.

“If you’re gonna talk about manners, coming onto another guy’s turf and doing as you please is pretty rude. Stay out of this until I’m down for the count, Dimitrie Vattler.”

The young noble nodded and relented surprisingly easily. Then…

“Then, I shall give you, ruler of this land, a present to display proper respect, so that you can fight without hesitation…*Manashi! Uhatsura!*”

“Wha—?!”

Kojou was at a loss for words as Vattler released a wave of enormous magical energy.

Two snakes surpassing ten meters in length appeared behind the youthful

aristocrat's back. The first was a black snake that looked like a raging sea; the other was a blue snake, like the surface of a pool frozen solid. These were the Beast Vassals of Vattler, the Master of Serpents. Furthermore, he was using two simultaneously. The two intertwined together in midair, changing shape to become a single giant dragon.

"Fusing two Beast Vassals together?! So that's Vattler's special ability…!"

Kojou spoke in a hard voice at the sight of the Beast Vassal, which resembled a raging waterspout.

Yukina had said it once. For Vattler, a noble of a younger generation, to have defeated a higher-ranking Wiseman, he must possess some kind of special power.

This was likely the key to unlocking that secret. Kojou had never before heard of the existence of a vampire who could fuse two Beast Vassals into a single, more powerful Beast Vassal.

But the truth was, the fused Beast Vassal Vattler had called forth was giving off magical energy on par with Kojou's Regulus Aurum. This constituted ample proof Vattler really did possess power near that of a primogenitor.

"Well, like this, I think."

Vattler made a satisfied-seeming murmur as his raging ultramarine dragon descended.

It then destroyed every single anchor connecting Sub-float No.13 to Itogami Island proper. These anchors, made out of concrete blocks and metal wires and weighing several hundred tons each, were shattered into little pieces like glass; as a consequence of those explosions, the sub-float slowly began to float freely over the ocean.

"You cut the sub-float off from the Itogami Island mainland…?!"

Kojou looked up as he realized what Vattler was aiming for. The young aristocrat leered back.

"This way, you can use your power however you like without concern for damage to the city. Do ensure that you amuse me."

“R-right…”

For a moment, Kojou hesitated as to whether to give token words of thanks, but he immediately put that thought aside. He realized that the Beast Vassal’s attack just then had done considerable damage to Itogami Island’s mainland as well. Kojou was absolutely certain that the man’s talk of damage to the city was just an excuse for him to throw his weight around.

“The Nalakuvera’s on the move, Kojou Akatsuki!”

Kojou hastily looked back as Sayaka’s urgent voice reached his ears.

The Nalakuvera knocked away the debris and girders around it, its entire body finally on display.

It was a six-legged tank some seven or eight meters tall. Taken as a whole, it looked something like a giant ant wearing the shell of a lobster. There were two small arms that resembled feelers connected to the elongated, elliptical head.

The armor’s texture seemed like clay or bronze, indeed giving it an “ancient weapon” look.

“Hmmm. It seems to have gone active from judging my Beast Vassal to be a threat. I see, so it is indeed running on a self-defense program alone…”

“So, you’re the reason it started moving?!”

Kojou glared and shouted as Vattler murmured in a detached manner.

The Nalakuvera’s crimson eye glared at both of them, firing a beam of light.

“Kojou Akatsuki!” Sayaka shouted while poising her sword.

“Aw, shit! So this is how it’s gonna be!”

As blast winds bathed Kojou’s entire body, he ran off to put a stop to the ancient weapon’s rampage.

Chapter Four
The Bicorn

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BICORN

1

The boy god Nezha worshipped by Taoists had three faces and eight arms. He was a god of combat with an artificial body constructed of lotus roots and gold, wielding a fire-spitting spear and an armband that could smash the heads of his foes…

However, the Nalakuvera, modeled in homage of the god Nezha, bore a form far too twisted and fiendish to be called a god itself.

Shrouded in thick armor, it had six legs it used to trample armored truck wreckage and mow down the cranes that towered over the area. The dazzling crimson beams spat out from its head rent the steel-enveloped sub-float with ease, creating tremendous explosions in the process.

That destructiveness, far beyond what was par for conventional land weaponry, surely rivaled that of vampire Beast Vassals.

Kojou understood very well why the Black Death Emperor Front wanted this. However, this ancient weapon continued to move of its own volition, regardless of its controller's will.

Even without Yukina spelling it out, there was no way he could let a dangerous monster like this enter city limits.

However, looking upon the Nalakuvera up close, he didn't know how he should take on something this ridiculously huge…

"What will you do, Kojou Akatsuki? How do you intend to slow that monster down?"

Reluctantly standing right beside Kojou, Sayaka spoke in a scolding tone. Kojou's eyes widened at her.

It was thirty meters, at most, between them and the Nalakuvera. Judging from the ancient weapon's great size, they were in just as great danger there as if they were standing right in front of it.

"Kirasaka?! What are you coming along for?!"

"Yukina said she wanted you to buy time, so it's natural for me to cooperate, you know!"

"Th-that's what it is?"

Though that was unlikely a calm, rational thought, Sayaka's vigorous assertiveness made Kojou accept it immediately. Sayaka added a nod, her face quite serious.

"Absolutely. Besides…"

Before she finished speaking, a beam burst from the Nalakuvera's head.

The fire-spitting spear…in modern terms, it was a large-caliber laser cannon. The spear, moving at the speed of light with a temperature surpassing twenty thousand degrees at its focal point, no doubt could turn even a vampire's flesh to ash in an instant.

But Sayaka had completed her motion before the beam had been unleashed.

The Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency saw and acted a moment into the future through her Spirit Sight. Sayaka's defense was therefore faster than the Nalakuvera's speed-of-light attack.

"…Kirasaka?!"

"My Lustrous Scale has two abilities… One of them is to neutralize physical attacks. Be grateful, Kojou Akatsuki. Had I not been here you would be cinders right about now!"

It was not physical matter that Sayaka's sword had severed, but the space that held it together. No matter how fast an attack, no matter how hot an attack, it could not dish out damage across a rip in space itself. For that single instant, the space that Lustrous Scale had rent was transformed into an absolute, invincible

defensive wall.

Before Kojou's eyes, the Nalakuvera's large-caliber laser seemed to slam into an invisible wall obstructing its path, vanishing into nothingness.

"And so, the wall that can defend against any attack is, in other words, the world's most resilient blade. There is nothing my sword dance cannot cut, even a weapon of the gods…!"

With the Nalakuvera having finished firing its laser, Sayaka sprinted toward the now-defenseless ancient weapon's feet, sword raised.

It was an entirely too huge sword for a slender girl to be using. Sayaka controlled it as if it was part of her own flesh and blood in a beautiful dance. She struck the Nalakuvera's leg with the silver blade, slicing it in spite of its thick armor; then she sliced it again. To the eye, it was a sword dance that contrasted magnificence with ferocity.

All Kojou could do was attentively watch the spectacle. Yukina's combat ability was inhuman, but Sayaka's sword art was no less so. In one sense, she, who could face a monster on equal terms, was quite a monster herself.

Sayaka continued her ferocious attacks. Though she was indeed unable to slice it in two, her ceaseless slicing attacks severed one of the Nalakuvera's legs.

Sayaka continued, focusing her attacks upon the two remaining legs of that side. Finally, the Nalakuvera's damaged legs were unable to sustain its weight; the huge body slowly collapsed. A single girl, with a single sword, had brought the weapon of the gods to its knees. Kojou could only call it nonsensical strength.

He wondered if, at this rate, the girl would defeat the Nalakuvera all by herself…

It was a moment after Kojou embraced such fleeting hope that the ancient weapon's body underwent a sudden change.

"Eh…?!"

Sayaka's sword, having one-sidedly slashed through the Nalakuvera until that point, suddenly bounced off the surface of its armor. Sayaka repeated her slicing

attack, but it fended off this as well.

A mysterious symbol emerged over the Nalakuvera's armor, enveloping the machine with the faint glow of magical energy. Sayaka exclaimed as she realized the true nature of that glow.

"A repulsion ward?!"

The blade of Lustrous Scale sliced through connecting space. However, this also meant the blade could only sever space it was in contact with. The repulsion field enveloping the surface of the Nalakuvera's armor had *evolved* to repel Sayaka's sword before the blade even touched it.

Her attacks would no longer work against the Nalakuvera…

"*This*…is what the weapon of the gods is capable of…?!"

A learning, self-evolving weapon. Sayaka shuddered at the thought. That became a momentary opening.

The Nalakuvera's feelers were watching Sayaka from above her head.

By the time Sayaka realized this, it was already too late. The tips of the feelers shot out crimson beams. The late-reacting Sayaka could not fend them off.

The incandescent spears could sear through thick steel in an instant.

No doubt, should Sayaka's body be bathed in them, not a trace of her would remain.

But what assaulted Sayaka was not an incandescent beam, but a simple physical impact.

Someone had thrust Sayaka away with a clumsy tackle.

"…Are you all right, Sayaka?!"

It was Kojou who had plunged headfirst into Sayaka, but as he yelled, she tumbled on top of the hard ground.

Sayaka's well-trained body broke the fall without thinking, immediately bringing her to her feet. All serious damage had been averted. However, her mental unrest was profound.

"Kojou Akatsuki?! That wound?!"

Kojou, rising to his feet, had white smoke rising from his gouged-out left thigh. It had been bathed in the Nalakuvera's laser when Kojou had shielded Sayaka.

"I'm all right. A wound this small's gonna close up in no time."

Kojou smiled even as his face grimaced in pain.

A vampire progenitor was unaging and undying. However, the pain they felt when injured was no different than that of any normal human.

No doubt Sayaka was well aware of that. Sayaka paled a bit, seemingly unable to find the words she ought to address to him.

"…Anyway, what's that guy doing?!"

Forcing himself to stand on his injured left leg, Kojou turned his eyes to the Nalakuvera. The ancient weapon, damaged by Sayaka's attacks, had apparently given up on moving.

Instead, the gently curved armor over its back slowly opened.

They beheld a series of wings stretching that resembled those of beetles. On the inside of the armor were cylindrical-shaped thruster nozzles.

"It's trying to fly?!"

The data Asagi had on the Nalakuvera suggested flight capability. Kojou ground his teeth as he recalled that fact.

With a roar, the Nalakuvera's nozzles scattered, blasting wind all about.

This was not winged flight as birds and pterosaurs understood it. This was powered flight by brute force.

But Itogami Island's city limits were but a few short kilometers away. If it could go up, it could surely land at a moment's notice. They could not allow the Nalakuvera to escape.

"…Smack it down, Regulus Aurum!"

Kojou raised his right arm above his head. Fresh blood spurted from it.

His fresh blood created a mass of enormous magical power that transformed into a golden beam of magical energy. The condensed beam shaped itself into the form of a giant beast in midair—a great lion shrouded in lightning.

This was Kojou Akatsuki's, aka the Fourth Primogenitor's, Beast Vassal, Regulus Aurum…

In spite of being nominally tamed, he'd hesitated to call upon its all-too-great might. But this was no longer the time or place for such concerns.

"Ooooooooooooo…!"

The lightning lion responded to Kojou's fighting spirit, racing across the heavens.

From a higher altitude than the climbing Nalakuvera, it transformed into a lightning bolt and raced toward the ground. Light scattered in all directions from the golden bolt of lightning, closing rapidly upon the ancient weapon.

The primogenitor's Beast Vassal, said to rival a natural disaster, struck.

The Nalakuvera machine withstood it. Despite the smashing apart of both sets of wings, the severing of its legs, and the loss of about half the armor over its entire body, somehow it managed not to explode.

However, it was impossible to negate the entire ferocious impact.

The lightning lion continued its vigorous descent, smashing the Nalakuvera into the ground.

It was might that the sub-float's hollow construction could not withstand. The thick steel covering the front's surface turned inside out, smashing the steel framework stretched within.

The Nalakuvera's huge body became a cannonball, breaching the surface and tumbling deep underneath.

And quite naturally, Kojou and Sayaka were caught in the shock wave that resulted.

"Uoooh?!"

The ground Kojou and Sayaka were standing on caved in without any warning.

A great hole opened at their feet that seemed like it continued all the way to the underworld. Kojou knew that he was falling when an unpleasant feeling of weightlessness assailed him.

Sayaka was right beside him. Amid the echoes of turbulent blast winds and the roar of falling debris…

“You idiot…!!”

…somehow, the sound of her shout was the only thing that registered to Kojou’s ears as strangely distinct.

2

Sub-float No. 13, constructed as a giant trash bin, was fundamentally built just like an oil tanker. The only differences were that it was meant to store compacted garbage, not oil, and it was an order of magnitude greater in size.

Though divided by numerous bulkheads, it was, in essence, an empty box enveloped by a hardy, steel shell.

From the surface to the deepest section, it was about thirty meters…

As that was equal to a ten-story building, it was actually taller than the apartment building Kojou and Nagisa lived in. Naturally, it wasn’t a height one could climb without gear. Having fallen from such a height, it was near miraculous they were alive at all.

“Somehow we’re all right…huh?”

Standing upon a mountain of debris, Kojou made a very deep sigh.

It wasn’t that they’d dropped thirty meters straight down; their descent had been relatively lenient, like riding the flow of a landslide. They’d smacked into several bulkheads on the way down, with that slowing their falling speed even further.

Kojou and Sayaka’s being all right was the product of coincidences piled one over another.

They had been fortunate the under-construction sub-float was empty.

Had it been full like other trash bins, they’d probably be buried alive under tens of thousands of tons of garbage by now. He figured that even an undying primogenitor was unlikely to recover from such a situation.

And as Kojou breathed a sigh of relief, Sayaka raised a “Kii!” in a high-pitched voice.

“We are *not* all right! What were you thinking?! Don’t you have any concept of restraint?! You didn’t have to make it punch through the whole float!!”

“Couldn’t help it, I was all worried ’bout that monster crab getting away…and that *was* trying to hold back…” Kojou replied in a small, halting voice. He really had meant to limit damage to the surrounding area, even though there was little point since they had a barrier. But…

“Good grief,” said Sayaka, seeming taken aback as she shook her head. “Certainly I can accept that’s power worthy of the World’s Mightiest Vampire, but that Beast Vassal’s nothing but trouble. One wrong step and you, its master, would be caught up in it and killed, too.”

“I’ll admit it’s trouble…but it shot that monster crab down, so things worked out.”

Kojou tossed his reply out while brushing down his dusty parka.

Seeing Kojou look not the least bit sorry, Sayaka glared in a bit of anger.

“And the Nalakuvera?”

“Who knows? You’d think it’s buried down there, though.”

Kojou pointed to the pile of fallen debris as he spoke. The spot where the ancient weapon had apparently crash-landed had a pile of debris some ten meters high piled on top of it.

With such a large amount of rebar and steel plates piled in the way, there was no sign of the Nalakuvera. However, neither did Kojou sense anything wriggling around beneath it.

“Did you destroy it?”

“Probably. That or so much damage it can’t move without an overhaul.”

“I see. That’s fine, but…well, what should we do now?”

Kojou scratched his head in response to Sayaka’s question.

The sub-float, built solely for storing an enormous amount of garbage, had a

suitably immense interior. On top of that, since the facility was still under construction, there'd be very few diagrams and little lighting available; only the bare minimum required in the event of an evacuation. They hadn't really expected anyone to just wander in there, after all.

"If we look around, we should be able to find an inspection ladder at least."

As he spoke, Kojou looked around the area as he walked to a suitable place.

"H-hold on, you're not thinking of leaving me?"

Sayaka, who seemed about to be left behind, hurried after Kojou.

"Ah!"

That moment, her legs went out from under her. Climbing up a pile of unevenly shaped debris, the seesawing angles made Sayaka lose her balance and tumble.

"Wh-whoa?!"

Luckily, Kojou was right there, reflexively catching her back as she fell faceup. He raised his eyebrows as his palms conveyed the presence of something quite ample and flexible.

"…Hya?!"

As Kojou ended up generously squeezing Sayaka's breasts, she let out a very girlie yelp.

Realizing the true nature of what he was grasping, Kojou quickly pulled both hands away.

Thanks to the summer sweater, he hadn't noticed, but Sayaka was apparently the well-endowed type. In spite of being so slender, the volume of her breasts was incredible.

"Er, sorry."

Kojou felt awkward as he apologized. Sayaka pressed her hands over her own breasts while glaring up at Kojou.

"What are you apologizing for? Did you do it on purpose? So you indeed have foul, evil intentions?"

"I do not. It's not that, but…Himeragi told me about it on the phone earlier."

Sayaka tilted her head with a puzzled look.

“Yukina? What did she…?”

“The reason you hate men.”

Kojou looked down at his own feet as he spoke, lowering his voice.

The look on Sayaka’s face stiffened, becoming like that of a doll.

“Sorry. I didn’t know you’re *scared* of men touching you.”

Yukina hadn’t explained the fine details, but Kojou had a pretty good idea of the circumstances.

As a child born with excellent spiritual ability, she was frequently treated badly by her parents. Sayaka’s one and only father was apparently the type of man who routinely used violence against her. When her father died before Sayaka entered primary school, the Lion King Agency took her in.

However, the fear she felt toward her father at such a young age still remained in her heart in the form of a general hatred of men. Kojou didn’t want to offer some kind of cheap sympathy, but he didn’t think Sayaka could be faulted for it.

Even though it was an emergency situation, Kojou reflected on the fact he’d picked her up, pinned her down, and insensitively touched her quite a bit all around.

For a while, Sayaka gazed at Kojou, an astonished look on her face.

Then, she suddenly grabbed hold of Kojou’s lips, roughly twisting upward. Kojou, unable to brush her hand off, objected without offering any resistance.

“What are you doing?! That hurts!”

“I wonder why Yukina talked to you about that…”

Sayaka spoke as if she was posing the question to herself. His lips still being twisted, Kojou shrugged his shoulders.

“She lectured me not to do anything that’d scare you. She was worried about you.”

“It’s not that I’m scared of it, it’s more like, it’s disgusting? Gross?”

“That’s even worse. Normally that’d put me down.”

Forcefully shaking his head, Kojou finally freed his lips from her grasp. Sayaka watched his red, swollen lips with a smile. It was a gentle, smiling face with no hostility whatsoever.

“You really are a strange vampire.”

Sayaka gently touched the back of Kojou’s hand with the fingertips of her freed-up right hand.

She increased the strength of her grip, as if carefully confirming something.

Kojou watched her with bewilderment, having no idea whatsoever what she was up to.

But he somehow understood that for Sayaka, touching a boy of her own volition was very much an act of courage.

“Is that wound from before all right?”

Sayaka looked at Kojou’s leg with a worried look. The leg wounded when he’d shielded Sayaka.

Kojou lightly flexed his knee up and down. Some pain still remained, but he’d regained almost all sensation.

“It’s healed enough I can walk on it at least?”

“I see, that’s good… Um…th-thank you for saving me.”

As if blushing, Sayaka lowered her face as she spoke. Kojou’s heart made a heavy thump and blood rushed through his arteries at her cherubic, white cheeks, the refined bridge of her nose, and her long emphasized eyelashes.

“Cold?!”

“Wh-why?! I was finally nice to you and everything…!”

Sayaka’s cheeks fiercely swelled at Kojou’s completely unexpected reaction.

Kojou shook his head as he put a hand to his back.

“No, it’s not you… There’s something cold against my back…”

That moment, a delicate cry of “Hya!” came out from Sayaka’s mouth.

When she pressed on her uniform's shoulder, it had somehow become thoroughly drenched. Water was falling like rain from all over the sub-float's framework.

"What's this? Seawater?!"

"Shit…this float's goin' all to hell!"

No matter how stoutly constructed a sub-float, Vattler's Beast Vassal recklessly severing it, the Nalakuvera's rampant laser fire, and the finishing blow with Regulus Aurum, had apparently exceeded its limits. Kojou and Sayaka simply hadn't noticed how water was already leaking in from all quarters.

"This isn't the time for complaints! We have to find a way back to shore and fast!"

Sayaka coolly pointed out the situation. The water wasn't leaking in especially strongly, but if the seals of the anti-flooding bulkhead were to rupture, escape would become far more difficult. It didn't feel very good being dripping wet and holed up in a place like this.

"So how 'bout we walk along one of the walls like when you're lost in a maze?"

"Anything's good as long as it's fast!"

As they traded silly banter, Kojou and Sayaka began to walk forward.

That moment, the thin darkness beneath the sub-float was bathed in a dazzling, crimson light.

The beam slashed apart the darkness in every direction, indiscriminately slicing its way through the sub-float's framework. It was the large-caliber laser of the Nalakuvera.

A mountain of debris came crashing down with a roar.

Within, the ancient weapon emerged, surrounded by a pale white light. The shapes had been slightly altered, but the armor and legs that were surely destroyed had been repaired.

"No way?! Why's it moving after we damaged it that much…?!"

"It can't be transmutation?! It merged with the sub-float's building materials

to regenerate! It doesn't seem to have regained its flight, but…"

The ancient weapon had fused with the debris all around it to repair the damage it had sustained.

Its two feelers pointed above its head, it had no doubt concluded it could not escape by going up.

The Nalakuvera inclined the barrel of its large-caliber laser toward its own feet.

The outer wall of a sub-float extended thirty meters underwater. The incandescent beam blasted through the steel-alloyed wall, dozens of centimeters thick, in an instant, opening a huge hole.

Seawater accelerated by water pressure gushed high like a geyser. It suddenly became a muddy stream advancing on Kojou and Sayaka's feet.

"Shit…seriously?!"

The Nalakuvera escaped through the hole of its own making. However, neither Kojou nor Sayaka had any time to worry about that. Thanks to that laser attack, fierce flooding had begun all over the sub-float.

Hand in hand, the two made a run for it. They were entirely drenched in seawater from head to toe.

3

Asagi continued deciphering the command codes in the room with a refrigerator-like chill. The smooth way she tapped the keyboard looked less like a programmer and more like a well-trained pianist.

Blowing white breaths, Asagi used the chat mike to call her "partner" across the network.

"Mogwai, no need for more morphological analysis. Apply ER algorithms, reassess all preliminary parameters, execute speculative process based on zeta distribution, and after that, begin step-by-step data comparison."

"You're as hard a taskmaster as always, young lady. The system bus is at its upper limits. Any more than this and it will interfere with Itogami Island

environmental maintenance.”

It was a mechanical composite voice that responded to Asagi’s call. It was the voice of the five supercomputers that held all of Itogami Island’s urban functions in its grasp. Asagi had dubbed the AI “Mogwai.”

Judging that using the single Souverän Nine inside the ship would take too much time, she’d used the network to call Mogwai and enlist the brain of Itogami Island itself to decipher the command codes.

“Keep it up even if the buffers all go to hell. We’re settling this in under fifteen minutes.”

“*Ku-ku-ku*…feels good to have you back to your old self.”

“Oh, shut up,” Asagi said, a fierce smile coming over her face. “I finally get the rules of this puzzle. They keep calling it a weapon of the gods, right? This is why the linguists all threw in the towel. They never imagined a language that doesn’t need logic or thought processes.”

Logic was unnecessary. In other words, the Nalakuvera did not assess the situation. After all, it was a weapon that existed solely to destroy. The ancient weapons did not think for themselves any more than a gun or a bomb.

When something for it to destroy was found, the Nalakuvera destroyed it, and that was that. It was the same fundamental logic of a god—*“Let there be light,” and light appeared*—the words of gods that fundamentally differed from men.

“But if you understand how it’s put together, it’s just obsolete architecture like any other.”

Having finished debugging the analysis program, Asagi let out a “hmph” through her nose.

There were fifty-two stone tablets containing the Nalakuvera’s command codes in total. The analysis would be complete in fifteen minutes. That meant the fearsome ancient weapon would come under the complete control of terrorists. But now that the Nalakuvera was active, this was the only way it could be stopped.

Since the Black Death Emperor Front wasn’t a pack of fools, they were surely

monitoring Asagi's work from somewhere.

In the current situation, with Nagisa, Yukina, and Itogami Island itself taken hostage, there was no point slowing her work down or trying to pull a fast one.

But it wasn't Asagi Aiba's style to just let herself be bossed around like this…

"What should I do now, I wonder…?" Asagi murmured while subconsciously stroking her earring.

How would she get back at a bunch that had deigned to make her work *for free*?

As a bloodcurdling look came over Asagi's face, Yukina quietly slipped out of the room, leaving her behind.

Yukina didn't really know what Asagi was doing. However, her unsurpassed genius was obvious, even to Yukina's untrained eyes. Asagi's sense and insight about programming was not really a product of a logical thought process; it was closer to Yukina and Sayaka's Spirit Sight or even divine possession.

To her surprise, had Asagi been raised by the Lion King Agency, she might already be a Sword Shaman surpassing even Yukina. She, too, was very much a resident of the Demon Sanctuary.

"…Why?"

Against her expectations, there were no guards keeping watch outside the girls' room.

Yukina had slipped out of the room because she'd had suspicions about that.

Even on a ship with nowhere to run, it felt a little too careless, not something one would expect from the highly trained Black Death Emperor Front. As she pondered such doubts, Yukina headed down a corridor along the ship's side. But she just couldn't make out guards anywhere.

The *Oceanus Grave* was so quiet that it almost seemed like a ghost ship.

She realized that one of the *Oceanus Grave*'s lifeboats was being lowered onto the surface of the sea. The ship's crew and Black Death Emperor Front noncombat personnel were boarding the lifeboat one after another. No doubt that was the reason why there were no soldiers standing guard.

“…Why evacuate noncombatants at a time like this?”

Yukina was perplexed, but of course no answer came to mind. Right now the *Oceanus Grave* was in no special danger. She saw no reason why they should abandon ship on the verge of seizing the Nalakuvera, creating a decisively favorable situation for them.

If there was any kind of danger, it wasn’t from outside the ship…

“It can’t be…?!”

Following her Sword Shaman instincts, Yukina sprinted. Her destination was not up to the bridge, but down, toward the cargo bay at the bottom of the ship. Though the *Oceanus Grave* was a cruise ship, it also had a stern gate like a freighter. In other words, it was capable of transporting a huge amount of cargo.

As if to confirm Yukina’s expectations, the corridor that continued to the cargo bay had armed Black Death Emperor Front troops standing guard: two beast men armed with automatic pistols.

She had no time to hesitate. Yukina leaped down the corridor, sprinting with all her strength to close the distance with the soldiers. As she expected, the soldiers were unprepared for this, their reactions dulled.

Yukina soared in midair before they could aim their guns.

“…Crouching Thunder!”

She delivered a ferocious roundhouse kick to the temple of one of the soldiers as he turned.

Though beast men had exceptional endurance, their anatomy was identical to that of human beings. If you rattled the brain around, you could inflict a slight concussion, especially if you did it before they bestialized.

“Raw Lightning!”

Crouching to use the unconscious soldier as a shield, she continued with a thrust to the solar plexus of the other soldier, releasing the ritual energy inside her body in the process. The stout beast-man soldier fainted in pain from the single blow.

Yukina turned toward the cargo bay, not even glancing at the fallen soldiers.

She pushed open the heavy metallic door, her eyes widening in shock at the sight.

“This is…”

The vast cargo bay contained densely packed, thickly armored weapons. Each had six legs, two feelers, and a crimson, glowing laser-gun eye.

“It can’t be… These are *all* Nalakuvera?!”

There were five inactive ancient weapons in total. There was something even larger positioned farther within, but Yukina couldn’t make it out from her location.

Yukina heard a voice from behind her that was ferocious yet calm.

“…Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, is it? Even better than rumored. In Europe, not many people can take down a beast man unarmed, even by surprise. Splendid work.”

“Kristof Gardos…!”

Yukina called out the man’s name. The aged officer of the Black Death Emperor Front smiled as he watched Yukina, utterly composed.

“Not even Vattler knows about these. He might not have cooperated with us if he knew.”

“So this is your true objective? Getting your hands on a Nalakuvera army?!”

Gardos nodded solemnly.

“War is not decided by the abilities of each individual weapon, but by combined military strength. The First Primogenitor’s combat ability is fearsome, but a single man cannot defend all of the Warlord’s Empire. A flock of combat machines that consume debris to repair themselves, able to fight in perpetuity… a sight to make the heart flutter, don’t you think?”

Taking enjoyment in watching the horrified Yukina, Gardos continued his voluminous explanation. Apparently, in spite of being the leader of a terrorist group, he was blessed with a gift for oratory.

“Even if we do not destroy the First Primogenitor, the collapse of his Dominion

will make the Holy Ground Treaty unsustainable. In so doing, we will achieve our objective. That combat maniac Vattler surely cannot understand our reasons."

"So you're saying, you'll sacrifice not only Itogami Island, but the people of your own homeland, the Warlord's Empire?"

Yukina glared at Gardos with a look of rage. Gardos nodded, his expression unchanged.

"Of course. That is why they call us terrorists."

Without a word, Yukina lowered her center of gravity.

Even a single Nalakuvera threatened to destroy the entirety of Itogami City. And the Black Death Emperor Front had five more of them. She could not allow such power to fall into their hands.

If she could take down Gardos here, even it meant sacrificing herself…

"*Hu-hu-hu*, quite ambitious, aren't you? What a pity. If I'd had people like you in my unit, I wouldn't have had to watch my old friend, the Black Death Emperor, killed right before my eyes…"

Watching Yukina enter a combat stance, Gardos seemed pleased as he stroked the old scar on his cheek. He drew a knife from his back. His physique let out a creak as his muscles swelled all over his body. He was bestializing.

However much intellect he displayed, his instincts were those of a terrorist who craved battle and destruction. Raising his voice in joy at the expected slaughter, he thrust his knife forward with incredible force.

Yukina evaded the gale-like attack by a paper-thin margin.

"Ha-ha! Splendid. Dodging *my* knife!"

Gardos immediately altered the arc of his knife. But the powerful movement created an opening to his side. Yukina slipped past Gardos's attack and placed a palm on his flank.

"…Distort!"

She unleashed a palm strike at point-blank range.

In close combat, this was Yukina's trump card—sending the force of an impact

past a beast man's thick flesh straight into its innards. She had once used the same technique to destroy the Lotharingian Armed Apostle's armored augmentation suit.

But the feedback of Yukina's palm was odd. Her face grimaced as she put distance between them.

There was no damage to Gardos's body. Yukina's palm strike had not worked upon him.

"…Bio-barrier?!"

"That is the skill you call qigong, is it not? You thought I was unversed in the martial arts because I am a beast man, didn't you?"

Gardos made an amused smile as he repositioned his knife.

To Yukina, the knife wasn't the real threat. Gardos's grip could easily shatter Yukina's bones; a tackle using that massive frame would no doubt smash Yukina's body to pieces.

Even knowing that, retreat was not an option for Yukina.

"…Roaring Thunder!"

Kicking off the wall and ceiling for acceleration, Yukina launched a tricky flying kick, using it to strike the side of Gardos's head.

There was no evading the attack, but Gardos stopped it cold with his forehead. His reaction speed and quick decision-making were products of a vast amount of combat experience.

"Hnng!!"

Gardos altered his direction with a shake of his head, sending Yukina's light body flying back.

Yukina somersaulted in midair like a cat and landed on the floor. Gardos chose that exact moment to barrel forward with his shoulder. Yukina barely managed to pull back and avoid him.

Gardos's action looked suicidal, but the aged officer broke through the outer wall of the *Oceanus Grave*, heading straight out with barely a scratch.

It was ridiculous destructive power even by the standards of hardy beast men.

Yukina pursued Gardos out onto the deck. She thought combat there would be more advantageous than in the narrow confines of the ship. However, at this rate, even if she continued to fight, she had no sense she could win.

Their combat skill was roughly equal. Gardos held the absolute advantage in speed; Yukina had the advantage in explosiveness. But the power difference was just too great.

Even though one blow from Gardos would put Yukina out of the fight, none of her attacks had worked on him at all.

Furthermore, Gardos was not holding back or underestimating Yukina whatsoever.

At this rate, defeat was inevitable. The moment such a feeling of despair began holding Yukina in its grip…

…A gust of incredible force assaulted both of them.

“What’s this wind?!” Gardos exclaimed in response to the sudden shift. It was a fierce wind one could only call a windstorm. The wind speed was surely the rival of that of a Category 5 typhoon. The lightweight Yukina was in danger of being easily blown away at the slightest loss of concentration. She couldn’t breathe with the mass of air directly slamming into her.

But what was truly surprising was the tranquillity of the sea all around the *Oceanus Grave*. The gust was raging in the vicinity of Yukina and Gardos alone.

Something was flying, riding on the wind. It had a beautiful silver blade. Its tip was split into a triple fork. The silhouette resembled a swept-wing fighter plane. It was a completely metallic, silver-colored spear—

“Snowdrift Wolf?!”

In midair, Yukina snatched the flying spear that had ridden the wind.

That moment, the raging windstorm abated, as if now that Yukina had received the spear, its duty was done…

“Who did this…?!”

She gazed with a shocked look on her face at the spear that had returned to her own hand.

The all-metal Snowdrift Wolf was by no means a lightweight weapon. Even though it had approached much closer to land, the *Oceanus Grave* was still some four to five hundred meters from Itogami Island.

To hurl the spear from that distance to deliver it to Yukina…she didn't know who it was, but it had to be someone extremely capable.

She personally knew of no one capable of such a feat. Furthermore, for that person to know Yukina was the wielder of the spear meant he or she knew exactly who and what Yukina was. But she'd worry about the person's identity later. The man she had to strike down was right before her eyes.

"Hmm. A Wind Master, is it?"

Gardos muttered while unhappily brushing down his wind-battered forelocks.

"As expected of the Far East's Demon Sanctuary; so many people making use of irregular talents. However…"

As Yukina glared at him, spear poised, his lips curled upward in delight.

"So this means I finally get to see your true power. Interesting. A strategic battle of probing, thrusting, steel and blood; this is what war *should* be like."

The joy of combat burned brightly in the beast man's eyes. But what flowed from Yukina's lips was a serene chant the polar opposite of the aged officer's ferocious roar.

"—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee."

Ritual energy surged within Yukina's body, amplifying Snowdrift Wolf. The glow made Gardos narrow his eyes. He realized that the silver spear in Yukina's hands was extremely dangerous to demonkind.

Gardos raised his knife and charged the defenselessly dancing Yukina. Yukina moved to intercept the blow, her movements rather sluggish…

"Oh, purifying light, Oh, divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your divine steel will, strike down the devils before me!"

Victory and defeat were decided in an instant. As the beautiful silver light crossed and vanished, the single attack Yukina unleashed had severed Gardos at the upper arm, taking the knife-wielding hand with it.

“…Splendid, Sword Shaman. But I shall be the victor of the war.”

Even as fresh blood gushed from the open wound, Gardos laughed. He picked up the severed right arm and leaped over Yukina’s head, heading toward the upper deck.

There stood two of Gardos’s men.

One was clutching a tablet PC to his chest; the other was holding one school uniform–wearing girl in each of his arms.

“Asagi-senpai?! Nagisa?!”

Yukina let out brief screams as she beheld the sight of the soundly sleeping girls.

Giving in to anger, she raised her spear and charged toward them. But a crimson beam of light suddenly swept before her: fire from a large-caliber laser.

“Nalakuvera?! It can’t be…?!”

Blood drained from Yukina’s face as she beheld the ominous sight of an ancient weapon piercing the surface of the sea as it emerged.

Even as the Nalakuvera clung to the hull of the *Oceanus Grave*, it did not attack anyone.

When Yukina realized this, she truly knew fear.

This ancient weapon was not in a berserk state. It was moving according to its controller’s will.

“The stone tablet decryption?”

Gardos pressed his men for information. One of them answered while setting Asagi and Nagisa down on the deck.

“It seems to be finished. Grigore has already confirmed that the contents are correct, as you can see.”

“I do see,” said Gardos, making a satisfied nod. The bleeding from where

Yukina had severed his arm had already stopped; pressing the lower arm section to the upper, they had already begun to fuse. His vitality was on a level shocking even for beast men.

"…So, that's how it is. Surrender now, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. I've waited a long time for Vattler. I have no time to play with the likes of you."

Yukina was completely backed into a corner. Even with Snowdrift Wolf, taking on Gardos and another pair of beast men at the same time would prove a difficult battle. On top of that, they had Asagi and Nagisa hostage; furthermore, they had the Nalakuvera under control. Any way one sliced it, Yukina had no chance of victory.

The *Oceanus Grave* pulled alongside the free-floating Sub-float No. 13, Nalakuvera in tow.

No doubt Gardos and his group's objective was to transport the inactive Nalakuvera in the cargo bay ashore, activating them once there. They meant to fight Vattler with all six Nalakuvera at once.

Even knowing this, there was nothing Yukina could do about it. With a roar echoing from its hydraulic pump, the stern gate of the *Oceanus Grave* opened.

A moment later…

Yukina's ears were pierced by a screaming, bestial howl reverberating through the air.

And the sub-float shuddered fiercely, countless fragments scattering about, as if it had been hit by a bomb.

4

"Shit…this one's a dead end, too, huh?"

Kojou's tired voice echoed amid the darkness. They were inside one of the narrow maintenance shafts spread throughout the sub-float.

Logically, the path would continue all the way to the surface, but it was not so simple in practice. On top of being like a maze, various sections were blocked off

by rubble. After going back and forth several times over, Kojou and Sayaka had completely lost track of where they were.

However, seawater continued steadily lapping at their feet. Water leaking from overhead had already drenched Kojou and Sayaka from head to toe.

“This isn’t good. The water level’s rising faster. At this rate, it won’t last ten minutes before sinking.”

Sayaka sent a hateful glare toward the rubble blocking their path as she murmured.

Kojou kicked aside a girder at his feet.

“…I can’t just blow it away with Regulus Aurum, though, can I?”

Sayaka stared straight at Kojou.

“If you summoned a mass of electricity into a drenched place like this, I’d be burned to a crisp along with anyone on the surface… Even you’d be hit pretty bad, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, suppose I would.”

Kojou sullenly slumped his shoulders. He’d had a vague sense of this before, but there were too many situations where a vampire’s Beast Vassals were of no use whatsoever. Even the backlight of his cell phone was a lot more useful as a wannabe flashlight than that fiendish lightning lion.

“Lustrous Scale can’t do anything about a pile of debris this big, either.”

Sayaka spoke while dragging her heavy-looking sword along with her left hand.

Well I suppose that’s true, too, thought Kojou.

“Even if a master swordsman can split a boulder in two, you can’t dig a tunnel with a katana, huh.”

“Yeah.”

Making a weak smile as she spoke, Sayaka sneezed; it was oddly charming.

Kojou noticed that her drenched shoulders were shivering a bit.

“Figures it’s cold down here, all wet like it is.”

Murmuring as he made white breaths, Kojou's eyes suddenly fell upon Sayaka's breasts.

Her wet, open-neck blouse was clinging to her skin, with her bra easy to see through it. The light pink floral pattern wrapped around two bountiful hills separated by an enchantingly deep valley.

To a vampire's night vision, it was an image far more vivid than was necessary.

"What is it?"

As Kojou suddenly went silent, Sayaka peered at his face, as if there was something mysterious about it.

"R-right," went Kojou as he averted his eyes in a hurry. Sayaka looked squarely at Kojou, a suspicious look on her face, and finally gasped before covering her own breasts.

"Kojou Akatsuki…!"

"I-I'm not! I thought, it's cold, so I figured maybe I should lend you my parka…"

"As if I'd wear a parka drenched with your hormones! I'd get pregnant!"

"Like hell you would!! What—do you really think vampires are here?!" Kojou yelled quite loudly. But for some reason, he did not hear the expected retort from Sayaka. She hung her head on the spot and began messing with her fingernails.

"…I-it makes me feel bad for Yukina somehow."

"Ah? Yukina's got nothin' to do with this. Here, put it on already."

Kojou forced his own parka onto the girl's shoulders. She was still drenched, but the warmth from Kojou's own body heat would surely help a tiny bit.

As if tasting that body heat for herself, Sayaka pulled the parka's collar closer.

"Hey, Kojou Akatsuki?"

"What now?"

"Do you think it'd work out if you used a different Beast Vassal?"

"Well…in this situation, I suppose, yeah."

Kojou frowned as he remembered someone having asked him a very similar question not long ago.

Kojou had inherited the twelve Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor. Surely one of them could blow the debris to bits in this situation; the one that had been on the verge of pulverizing the school's roof, perhaps.

"…But when Regulus Aurum came against my will before, it burned a section of Island East to a crisp. If something like that happened here, an artificial island on its last legs like this would sink straight to the bottom of the sea."

This said, Kojou made a sigh. Why did the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor have to be so difficult to use?

But Sayaka continued to look up at Kojou.

"If you can control it, it's fine, right? Yukina let you suck her blood so that you could, right?"

"Kirasaka?"

Kojou raised his eyebrows at Sayaka's acting like she was mulling something over.

For some reason, Sayaka's cheeks were red, her gaze wandering all about.

"Er, ah, y'know, I really am…big, aren't I?"

As she posed her abrupt question, Kojou's reply got caught in his throat. His gaze subconsciously shifted to how her breasts poked out from the parka's seams.

"W-well, you're certainly not small compared to Himeragi."

"I suppose not. Not cute at all."

Sayaka spoke with a self-deprecating smile.

What does she mean? Kojou wondered, perplexed. Perhaps she couldn't wear cute bra designs because her breasts were too big or something? Certainly one might argue Sayaka's body was too curvaceous for that. But…

"It's nothing you need to worry about, though."

"Eh?"

“A lot of guys like big, right? Feminine.”

Kojou spoke while his head throbbed from recalling his best friend.

But Sayaka tilted her head with a perplexed look.

“Feminine? Smaller isn’t cuter?”

“Well, ah, there’s certainly people who like that, too. People have different tastes about that. Well, it might be hard on a girl’s shoulders and stuff, though.”

“…Hard on the shoulders? What do you mean?”

Sayaka’s eyes blinked a few times. Kojou tilted his head a bit, just like she was.

“Er? It’s not like that? I thought I saw some gravure idol talking about that once…”

“Gravure idol?”

Sayaka’s face turned serious, the confused look vanishing. Finally, her shoulders began slow, angry tremors as she spoke.

“…Who’s talking about breasts here?! I’m talking height, height!!”

“Ah? Why are you talking about height all of a sudden?”

“I’ve been talking about that from the beginning here!”

Sayaka growled in her throat like a ferocious dog.

Kojou had a languid look on his face as he looked down at Sayaka.

“Kirasaka, it’s not like you’re *that* tall, anyway. A hundred sixty-six or seven, about there? That’s normal good looks in my book.”

As a former basketball player, Kojou found height of Sayaka’s level to be completely normal. He even thought that her eye level made her easier to talk to up close.

Perhaps the last phrase came off well, for Sayaka’s mood improved slightly.

“Even so, I was the tallest girl in my whole school! Thanks to that, I kept getting the royal princess treatment…”

“Royal princess treatment…?”

Kojou remembered how she'd desperately yelled, "This doesn't count." She seemed oddly worked up about it, but to Sayaka, who was so sensitive about her height, it was a pretty big deal.

"Th-that's why I was just a little happy. That's never happened to me before." Sayaka spoke, beet red to the tips of her ears. "S-so it's really just that. It's not that I fantasized about someday having a fateful encounter with a man who sweeps me off my feet and falling in love with him or anything…!"

"R-right."

Kojou was a bit relieved that Sayaka wasn't actually angry.

Right now, she looked like an ordinary high school girl, just like Kojou's classmates. You wouldn't think she and the War Dancer who fought the Nalakuvera so valiantly were one and the same. This was probably the Sayaka that Yukina had always seen as her roommate. He could even agree with the thought that she was cute.

Sayaka grabbed Kojou's uniform over his stomach and gave it a gentle pull. In doing so, she pulled herself closer to Kojou. Before Kojou knew it, the two were close enough that their breaths were mixing together.

"So…keep this secret from Yukina, okay?"

Sayaka's voice trembled as she murmured. It was no doubt because of cold and fear.

But seeming to have made her decision, her trembling ceased the instant she leaned fully into him.

"I thought I'd let you suck my blood to thank you, just once. Or perhaps I'm not good enough?"

Kojou was moved by the sight of Sayaka's teary eyes looking up at him.

"No, nothing like that, but are you all right with this, Kirasaka…?"

Sayaka responded to Kojou's concerned inquiry by gently moving her hands around his back.

Kojou and Sayaka's bodies were still cold and dripping wet. However, their skin, pressed together like this, conveyed gentle warmth to the other.

“I’m…not afraid of you. Strange, isn’t it…? You being the World’s Mightiest Vampire and all…”

As Sayaka said that, she gently touched Kojou’s mouth, Kojou’s sharp, tapered fangs…

The flow of water into the corridor increased in vigor, strongly enough that they might be swept away if they were not embracing each other so strongly. Finally, their two silhouettes merged into one, with Sayaka’s minute pants echoing across the surface of the water.

5

“Shit…it just ain’t gonna work.”

Yaze made ragged breaths as he spat out the remnants of the capsules he’d stuffed down his throat.

The chaotic vortex of air around him was an aftereffect of having used his ability.

He’d hurled Yukina’s left-behind Snowdrift Wolf all the way to the *Oceanus Grave* floating atop the ocean. It was makeshift work only possible with Yaze’s control of the wind, but that much had worked out.

Yukina had defeated Gardos as he’d hoped. According to Yaze’s calculations, Yukina and the other girls would finally be safe. He hadn’t counted on the Nalakuvera’s control codes being deciphered faster than he expected.

“Even Himeragi can’t do anything against that ancient weapon. Damn you, Asagi, I risked an adverse reaction to help you, but you just had to work so damned hard…”

Yaze spat out frail complaints while slumping down to the ground.

Watching Yaze like that with an amused expression, Vattler, wearing his gaudy three-piece suit, spoke.

“I see. So as an observer, you are forbidden from direct intervention in combat. This must be quite hard on you…”

“Only ’cause you got in my way back there. Would’ve gone a little better if you hadn’t.”

Yaze glanced sideways at Vattler, glaring. Yaze had realized the Black Death Emperor Front had been aboard the *Oceanus Grave* right after Asagi and the girls had been kidnapped. If he’d been able to leak that intel to the Island Guard, they wouldn’t have fallen for the decoy operation; things would’ve no doubt unfolded much differently.

“But thanks to that, it’s been quite an amusing sight.”

Vattler said that without the slightest bit of shame.

Five Nalakuvera units were being hauled out of the *Oceanus Grave* just as it pulled alongside Sub-float No. 13.

Even one of the ancient weapons wielded considerable combat ability, but they had six in total. To Vattler, that surely made it a deeply fascinating battle. This was what he'd come all the way to a small island in the Orient for.

"Now then, Gardos's preparations appear to be complete, so perhaps it's my turn finally?"

Anticipating a battle to the death as he had not known in some time, Vattler began cheerfully walking forward.

Yaze made a sarcastic laugh behind his back.

"Don't be so sure. Let me say this as the Fourth Primogenitor's best friend… I don't think you should expect him to behave according to plan."

As if to back up his words, the area around Vattler and Yaze was bathed with a painful, high-frequency ringing.

What followed was a ferocious tremor that made the entire sub-float creak and tremble.

"…Oh my," Vattler murmured with what seemed like admiration. An incredible mass of magical power had emerged from beneath the sub-float, releasing an ominous, indiscriminate surge in all directions.

It was a wild, violent mass of energy surpassing even Vattler's fused Beast Vassal. Such a thing did not exist on Itogami Island, with the sole exception of the Beast Vassals of Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor…

"There you are, Kojou." Yaze murmured in apparent satisfaction, closing his eyes, his strength seemingly exhausted.

An explosive sound gushed out from underground, becoming a shock wave that blasted through the surface of the sub-float, sending a huge amount of debris swirling into the air. Even so, the roar that shook the ground did not vanish.

The tremor warped the condensation in the atmosphere, creating a shimmer;

finally, the shimmer changed into the form of a beast: a giant beast, bearing two horns, with an incandescent, glittering mane…

Gardos's conduct was swift and decisive.

"One of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals! Grigore! I'll head out in the queen. Hold him off until then."

"…Copy that, Lieutenant Colonel."

With that final phrase over the radio, the first Nalakuvera went on the move with a roar. It headed toward the twin-horned Beast Vassal as it scattered its crimson beam all about.

"Wait, Kristof Gardos!"

Yukina turned her silver spear over and chased after them. With a scornful, annoyed look at her, one of Gardos's men threw something. It was a metallic cylinder about the size of a tin juice container.

Yukina was terrified the moment she realized it was a grenade.

Their hostages, Asagi and Nagisa, had been left behind on the upper deck. If they took that at point-blank range, the defenseless girls would be blown away without a trace.

Yukina gave up on pursuing Gardos and rushed to cover the girls lying on the deck. Her intent was to use her body as a shield to protect them both from the grenade explosion.

"…!"

But Yukina was not struck by the impact she had resigned herself to.

Far into the distance, a small bit of water spray flew up and scattered over the sea.

"Eh?"

Confused, Yukina rose to her feet. There had been no time to pick up the grenade and throw it. There *certainly* hadn't been enough time to spare to hurl it that great a distance.

But the grenade had been moved regardless, as if someone had teleported it

along with the space around it…

“…It would seem you’re all safe, relatively speaking.”

Right before Yukina’s eyes, empty space formed what seemed like a ripple, with a small woman gently walking out of it—a woman with an elegant dress and a black-frilled parasol.

“Thanks to your swinging that spear around, the barrier around this ship was torn, so I was finally able to teleport in. I must thank you for shielding my students, Yukina Himeragi.”

“Ms. Minamiya?!”

Yukina was struck with surprise as she looked up at the void from which Natsuki had emerged without a sound.

Spatial teleportation was a type of magic of the utmost difficulty. Even within the Lion King Agency, only a few people could use it on an individual level. She’d never even heard of a user who could employ it with the same ease as entering a neighboring room.

Her appearance might have been cherubic, but she was apparently more of a monster than Yukina had imagined.

Perhaps it was to be expected of the Fourth Primogenitor’s homeroom teacher. Her constant haughty attitude toward him wasn’t for nothing.

“I’ll take them to a safe place. What will you do, transfer student? Coming with us?” Natsuki inquired as she embraced the sleeping Asagi and Nagisa.

Yukina shook her head as she rose up.

“I will rendezvous with Akatsuki-senpai. I’m his watcher, after all.”

“Hmph. Quite the workaholic. Do as you like,” said Natsuki as space bent nearby. She roughly tossed the still-asleep Asagi and Nagisa into it. Then, with a slight hint of mischief, she smiled with a small chuckle. “But your help may not even be needed.”

“Huh?”

Leaving that significant-sounding comment behind, Natsuki vanished into thin

air. Still confused, she searched for Kojou, who was surely in combat with the Nalakuvera.

Above the sub-float, Kojou's Beast Vassal was dominating the damaged ancient weapon: a bicorn with an incandescent mane; a Beast Vassal unknown to Yukina.

There was only one thing that could mean. Somewhere Yukina couldn't see, Kojou had sucked on someone's blood.

For some reason, thinking of that fact made Yukina distinctly uncomfortable; she was a little perplexed at how irritated she felt.

But from a rational perspective, of course Yukina was angry at his sucking on another person's blood off on his own, without even a word to his watcher. *Yes, that's all it is,* Yukina told herself.

It was then that Yukina heard the ringtone for an incoming call beside her. The ringtone was from Asagi's smartphone.

Looking at the name displayed on the screen, Yukina answered the call.

"Hey, young lady. The job's finished."

The voice she heard through the digital link was the artificial voice of Asagi's partner.

With Itogami Island's citywide functions in its grasp, making a call to a cell phone was no great feat.

"Err…Mogwai, was it?"

Yukina very timidly called out its name. Mogwai seemed to immediately identify the speaker through analysis of her voice.

"Oh my. You're the transfer student, the young lady's rival, yes?"

"Eh? Rival?"

"And Asagi is?"

"Right now she's being evacuated to a safe place. She should be asleep."

Mogwai made a "hmm" at Yukina's words, looking like he was contemplating something. For an artificial intelligence, it was quite a refined trick. No doubt his

over-the-top appearance mixed with actual subtlety was a reflection of his master's personality.

"I see. What will I do? She told me to send it to her cell phone without the terrorists noticing but…"

"What are you talking about?"

Yukina raised her voice louder. Asagi had been covertly working on something right under Gardos's nose. She thought it had to be *very* important.

"Well, y'see."

Mogwai reluctantly opened his mouth, as if cowed by Yukina's threatening manner.

"It's a command code for the ancient weapon thingy…*the fifty-fifth*."

6

Kojou and Sayaka were standing together on top of a road on a gently sloped hill.

It was the first time in a while they could see the bright sun above their heads. The summer sea breeze felt good over their cold, wet bodies.

Behind Kojou and Sayaka, there was a crater one could mistake for a dried-up lake about three hundred meters in diameter.

In a concentric circle, the steel plates that covered the sub-float's surface had caved in; and in the center of that sunken crater, an incandescent bicorn raised an ear-splitting roar.

"…You're really something else."

Looking back at the crater, Sayaka made a sigh of lament, looking utterly beside herself.

But her words were tinged with a tone that seemed somehow amused.

"Certainly that got us back to the surface, but you didn't have to make that ridiculously huge crater, too. If I hadn't protected us from the debris with

Lustrous Scale's barrier, we'd both have been buried alive."

"If you've got a problem with it, tell it to *him*. I was gonna be happy if it just did somethin' about the debris blocking the corridor." Kojou retorted in a voice that oozed mental fatigue.

Yes, the power of the newly obtained Beast Vassal had blown away the debris in the corridor.

That's all Kojou wanted. However, what actually happened was that the Beast Vassal, figuring, *If the ceiling's too high to escape, just lower it*, engaged in wholesale destruction. Thanks to the vibration and shock waves, the sub-float's internal pillars and walls were pulverized, making the ceiling cave in on them.

Regulus Aurum was a huge heap of trouble, but this wild, twin-horned horse was every bit as much so, perhaps even worse…or perhaps that exceedingly horrid sense was just a figment of his imagination. But right now, he was relying on that ferocity.

"Yukina really is in danger from being close to someone like you."

Sayaka looked up at Kojou as she spoke. There was none of the old sharpness in her voice. She nestled against him as they stood, a smile coming over her face.

"That's why, this one time, I'll take very good care of you. Let's settle this quickly."

Sayaka's gaze was turned toward the sight of the ancient weapon landing once more. This was the wounded Nalakuvera that Kojou and Sayaka had initially fought against.

Its form hadn't changed since the last time they'd seen it. However, its movements were clearly different. They were intelligent movements reflecting the will of a pilot. It used the caved-in terrain as a shield as it launched a crimson beam from its sub-arm.

On his own, Kojou probably could have never dodged such an unorthodox attack.

But Sayaka's sword stopped the speed-of-light attack cold. Taking good care of him as she'd promised, she was acting as Kojou's shield.

“Get over here, Beast Vassal Number Nine: ‘Al-Nasl Minium’…!”

The flesh of the seemingly shimmering Beast Vassal was like an incredible oscillation given form.

The two horns that thrust out of its head resonated like a tuning fork, spreading about a fiendish, high-frequency vibration. This vibration could reduce boulders to dust, rip through metal. In terms of annoyance to the neighbors, it was without question the most awful of Beast Vassals.

And the roar of the bicorn became a barrage of shock waves that assailed the Nalakuvera.

The titanic magical energy possessed by the primogenitor’s Beast Vassal transformed the “oscillation” into a mass of physical energy and pounded it home. It wrecked the weapon of the gods to its core. The armor was shattered, the endoskeleton broken, and the radical change in the air pressure heated the surrounding air thousands of degrees Celsius, scorching the machine.

Blown several hundred meters away, the Nalakuvera came to a halt.

“Oh, crap…is the pilot inside…dead?”

It was Kojou who was beside himself at the bicorn’s merciless attack.

There had to be a Black Death Emperor Front terrorist inside the Nalakuvera. He didn’t think anyone could survive being blown away that spectacularly, but…

“A beast man’s life force is too strong to die from just this. I don’t think he’ll be moving for a while, though.” Sayaka shouted right into the unnerved Kojou’s ears. “More importantly, the five units over there! Smash them before pilots can get in!”

“R-right!”

Sayaka was pointing at the Nalakuvera that’d been brought out of the *Oceanus Grave*. Lacking pilots, the units were inert, even now. Like that, it should have been possible to smash them without any difficulty.

However, when the incandescent bicorn moved to attack the swarm of ancient weapons, its giant body was struck in the side by an equally giant explosion.

“…The heck?!”

What halted the advance of the bicorn was a flying disk spewing out flames. It greatly resembled the chakrams used by a certain god of battle from western China. And the chakram that violently crashed into the bicorn exploded, becoming enveloped by a giant whirlwind of fire.

Apparently the chakram was really like a missile with a warhead packed with explosives.

Its power was probably equal to or greater than guided missiles for attacking built-up urban areas. It wasn't enough power to defeat a primogenitor's Beast Vassal in a single blow, but it certainly was capable of halting the bicorn's charge.

The annoyed incandescent Beast Vassal shook off the flames that lingered over its entire body.

The bicorn glared toward the aft deck of the *Oceanus Grave*. Something massive ripped apart the beautiful megayacht's hull and emerged.

It was covered in the same type of armor as the Nalakuvera, but much, much larger. It had eight legs and three heads. Its torso was swollen like that of a queen ant. Chakrams poked out of gaps in the armor covering the torso, resembling a multiple launch rocket system…

It launched a massive volley of chakrams toward the menacingly roaring bicorn.

"Kojou Akatsuki, get down!"

"Wha…?!"

Sayaka swung her sword, creating a defensive barrier. The air above the barrier protecting Kojou and Sayaka was filled with exploding flames. The bicorn had released its own oscillation wave to counter the volley of chakrams. The two mighty forces violently clashed overhead, spreading incredible destruction around the entire area.

As the blast winds buffeted him, Kojou looked up, dumbfounded.

The damage wasn't limited to Sub-float No. 13. Having lost their target in the flames of the explosion, several of the chakrams fell on Itogami Island proper.

One great explosion erupted after another. Black smoke spewed from inside the city.

“Why…is this happening…?”

Kojou, weakly falling to one knee, gave into anger and punched the ground hard.

Nearby residents should have been evacuated by the Island Guard. But that didn’t change the fact damage had occurred. Like a true terrorist group, the Black Death Emperor Front was indiscriminately destroying the lives of completely unrelated people.

The Queen Nalakuvera, already on the move, gently landed onto the sub-float.

The remaining five Nalakuvera moved as well.

Operating in perfect sync, they surrounded Kojou and Sayaka. No doubt they were being commanded by the Queen Nalakuvera.

So this was the weapons’ true form. Weapons meant to fight as a unit in pursuit of operational objectives.

“Hmmm…so this is the Nalakuvera’s true might?”

As Kojou ground his teeth without thinking, his ears detected a man’s voice floating up from somewhere. It was Vattler, casually walking over amid the charcoal-scented smoke.

“You really pulled a fast one on me, Gardos, keeping a trump card like this under your sleeve. What will you do, Kojou? Perhaps I should take him on in your place?”

Vattler spoke to Kojou with his white fangs bared as if making a challenge. Even under these circumstances, the snobbish man behaved with a peculiar courtesy.

Kojou made an unpleasant click of his tongue and glared at him with a hostile look.

“I told you to butt out of this, Vattler…! I’ve just about had it with everyone just doing whatever they want!”

As if exceeding its boiling point, Kojou's body was enveloped in true anger. The flame had been lit, awakening the fighting spirit that lurked within Kojou, making his primogenitor "blood" seethe.

"I don't care if it's against your terrorists or ancient weapons or whatever. From here on, this is *my* fight!"

Vattler looked upon the ominous aura that shrouded Kojou with a smile of admiration.

And, immediately to Kojou's right, a small silhouette walked forward, as if naturally taking its proper place.

"…No, senpai. This is *our* fight."

It was a young girl in a school uniform, poising a silver spear. For some reason, there was a pouty look in Yukina Himeragi's eyes as she looked up at Kojou.

7

"H……Himeragi?"

Kojou called out her name in surprise. Yukina's eyes remained cold and expressionless as she tilted her head slightly.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Er, ah…why are you here?" Kojou inquired, a baseless uneasiness mixed with pangs of guilt.

She had to have been on the *Oceanus Grave* with Asagi and Nagisa until just now. Meaning, both of those girls had been evacuated to a safe place, and furthermore, she'd been able to obtain Snowdrift Wolf once more. Good work in such a short time frame.

"I'm a watcher, after all. *Your* watcher."

For some reason, Yukina placed emphasis on that last part while turning the tip of her spear toward Kojou. Her face remained expressionless as she looked over Kojou, Sayaka, and the incandescent bicorn emerging from the flames of the explosion.

“So you tamed a new Beast Vassal, senpai.”

Yukina stated it in a frigid, inflectionless voice. Kojou gulped and nodded, meeting Sayaka’s eyes.

“Y-yeah. Somehow stuff just happened and it turned out like this.”

“R-right. It was an unforeseen emergency that arose, a veritable act of God.”

As Sayaka awkwardly lowered her eyes, her fingertips tugged at the collar of the parka she was wearing.

Yukina watched her behavior with a somewhat surprised look on her face.

“I see.”

They’re both hopeless, she might have said, making a long sigh. She repositioned her silver spear, pointing it toward the Nalakuvera.

“We will postpone this discussion until later, then. First, we must get closer to them.”

“R-right.” *Let’s do that, let’s do that,* nodded Kojou.

Yukina made another brief sigh, glaring at the giant ancient weapon crawling over the ground as she spoke.

“Senpai, Kristof Gardos is inside that Queen Nalakuvera.”

“Queen…so that’s their command unit?”

Before Kojou even finished his sentence, the queen of the ancient weapons let loose another volley of chakrams. The bicorn’s roar shot them down, filling the air around them with flaming explosions once more.

The five smaller Nalakuvera followed by scattering crimson beams about.

Sayaka desperately cut down each incandescent ray as they assailed the area around Kojou and the girls one after another.

The attacks set the hull of the *Oceanus Grave* ablaze as an aftereffect; the sub-float Kojou and the others were on made an ominous creak. Little surprise that even the stoutly built outer wall was finally at its limits.

“Aw, crap, they’re all goin’ nuts…!”

Kojou groaned as he covered his ears at the incessant sounds of explosions.

Sayaka was breathing heavily as she yelled out, “Kojou Akatsuki. This is getting worse and worse!”

“I know that!… Get over here, Regulus Aurum!”

Kojou raised his right arm up high, summoning his other Beast Vassal.

The thunderbolts flung about by the lightning lion danced toward the enemy formation, blowing away all five ancient weapons in an instant.

Then, like a flash, it charged toward the command unit. The Queen Nalakuvera’s giant body plunged into the sea.

The lion moved to pursue the submerged command unit.

“Senpai, don’t! If a mass of lightning like that hits the water…!”

Yukina rushed to restrain Kojou. However, by then, the lightning lion had already completed its dive toward the surface of the sea. Its massive electrical current scattered across the surface of the ocean, with the heat causing a massive explosion of steam.

“Gwa…!”

A giant waterspout rose hundreds of meters into the air as the explosion’s tremors shook the sub-float. Kojou faltered from the unexpected impact. Apparently, the nature of Regulus Aurum made it a Beast Vassal impossible to use underwater.

“Then, I’ll do *this*…!”

The chakram attacks having just ceased, the freed-up bicorn howled. Its twin horns resonated, amplifying the oscillation. The spreading impact made the ground shake and caused giant waves to form. And like something out of the Old Testament, the sea parted, with the incandescent Beast Vassal at the center.

Watching Kojou and the others fighting, Vattler clapped his hands as he made an admiring “ha-ha!’

“So you parted the sea, Kojou! As expected of a Fourth Primogenitor Beast Vassal. It’s quite a lovely spectacle.”

“This ain’t some pony show!”

Tossing an angry shout back at the young nobleman’s innocent act, Kojou continued with more ferocious attacks. The bicorn pounded shock wave bullets toward the giant body of the now-exposed Queen Nalakuvera. They collided with the dry bottom of the sea, burying over half of the large ancient weapon and holding it in place.

The parted sea returned to its former self, with the violent waves covering up the Queen Nalakuvera.

“Did we get it…?” Kojou muttered in a languid tone. Controlling two Beast Vassals at once was of course mentally draining. If he let up for one second with these two, they could go berserk at any time.

But Sayaka sharply scolded the half-relieved Kojou.

“Not yet, Kojou Akatsuki!”

Her sword flashed, protecting Kojou from a crimson beam from below.

The five Nalakuvera that he thought Regulus Aurum had destroyed were on the move again. And on the opposite side, the first unit, destroyed by the bicorn, was getting up, its body still scorched all over.

“Self-repairing…?! They can come back even from that?!”

“That’s not all. They altered their damaged armor’s composition to better resist vibrations and impacts. They analyzed your attacks and took countermeasures against them.”

Sayaka assessed the situation with a calm expression. It was the same as when it had blocked her sword dance. Once sustaining an enemy attack, it learned and altered itself to resist that attack.

Furthermore, it seemed they were able to instantly trade information to other Nalakuvera units over a joint network. Even if one Nalakuvera was put out of the fight, the other units had already girded themselves against the same attack. And through self-repair of destroyed units, even they returned to the front lines.

“So the reason they resisted Regulus Aurum’s attack is because they learned it already. Getting stronger from taking hits…how the hell do you beat a thing like

that?”

Kojou realized he felt overwhelmed. No matter how many he destroyed, they regenerated; furthermore, the more one attacked them, the stronger the weapons became. Perhaps they truly did have the power to defeat the primogenitors.

But as unease assaulted Kojou, Yukina looked up at him and made a gentle smile.

“No, senpai. It’s all right—we will win this.”

As she spoke, she brought out a small light purple smartphone.

She called out to the artificial intelligence that looked like a teddy bear floating on the LCD screen.

“…Isn’t that so, Mogwai?”

“Oh yeah. The counterattack’s going all according to Li’l Miss Asagi’s plans.”

“Asagi’s…?”

Kojou was beside himself at the mention of the unexpected name. What could Asagi, supposedly a helpless high school girl, do against an invincible ancient weapon?

“While Aiba was analyzing the Nalakuvera’s command codes, she was secretly putting together a *new* command code.”

“It’s a type of computer virus…corrupting the Nalakuvera self-repair function so that they destroy themselves. She calls it, ‘The Final Words.’”

“A virus… Was it something easy to make?”

Of course, Kojou was well aware that Asagi was a brilliant programmer.

However, the opponent wasn’t a personal computer or a game machine. It was a weapon of the gods, not something created by man. For her to have analyzed stone tablets that had resisted the efforts of scholars all over the world and used their weaknesses to plant a virus on the side…

The word *genius* seemed inadequate to describe such jury-rigging. This was complete insanity.

“I’d say that young lady’s the only one who could have done it… The terrorists’ luck ran out when they angered the Cyber Empress. Make sure *you* don’t get too far on the young lady’s bad side. *Ku-ku-ku*…”

Mogwai spoke in what seemed like a teasing tone. Kojou silently shrugged his shoulders.

“So, what are we supposed to do, Himeragi?”

“The Nalakuvera are audio controlled. If we get inside the Queen Nalakuvera and use the audio file Aiba made, it should put a stop to all of them.”

As she spoke, Yukina shifted her gaze to the sea. The large ancient weapon, which should have been at the bottom of the sea, was just surfacing after finishing its own self-repairing.

“So get inside the big one… Uh, how? They’ll cut us to pieces. If we could just stop ’em from moving for a bit…”

Kojou groaned as his despairing premonition ate at him. Kojou’s two Beast Vassals had already moved to protect them. They had their paws and hooves full defending against a storm of descending chakrams and ceaseless large-caliber laser fire.

The Beast Vassals’ attacks would have little effect now that the Nalakuvera had learned them.

For the moment, they were still pushing the enemy back with overwhelming brute force, but that superiority surely wouldn’t last for long.

Kojou thought that he and the girls approaching the Queen Nalakuvera in the flesh under these circumstances was nothing less than suicide.

If they could destroy them even one more time, making an opening while they regenerated, they could manage, but…

Just as Kojou ground his teeth over his own powerlessness…

“I’ll pin down the Nalakuvera, Yukina.”

Sayaka walked forward, her long, beautiful hair swaying behind her.

“Kirasaka?”

“You understand, Kojou Akatsuki? If they evolve according to our attacks, we have only one chance at this. If Yukina and I are holding you back, we’ll all burn to a crisp.”

Gripping her sword with her left hand, Sayaka thrust it forward.

The silver sword blade suddenly split to the front and back. Using the part joined to the hilt as a fulcrum, half of the split blades turned 180 degrees. Pulling a silver bowstring taut, it changed form into an entirely new weapon.

“…A *bow*?!”

Kojou let out a voice of admiration. Sayaka’s sword was now transformed into a beautifully arched, silver bow. It had the modern, occidental shape of a recurve bow.

Lifting up her own skirt, she drew a metal dart from a leather holster wrapped around her thigh.

“Der Freischötz. This is Lustrous Scale’s true form.…”

In one smooth, beautiful motion, she notched an arrow and powerfully drew the bow.

“…I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee.”

A crystal-clear chant flowed out from Sayaka’s lips.

The ritual energy welling up in her body further amplified the bow’s power as she fired the silver arrow at the heavens.

Sayaka had said Lustrous Scale had two abilities. The first was to nullify physical attacks with an absolute defensive barrier. If that was so, what was the other…?

“Most Brilliant Flaming Horse, Illustrious Kirin, He Who Governs Heavenly Thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath…!”

Sayaka loosed her silver arrow.

Soaring with a shrill sound as it split the air, what seemed like a voice of lament that morphed into an ominous thunderclap. This high-pitched sound was the true ability of Der Freischötz, the Cursed Magic Bow.

“…Sound?!”

Kojou, too, realized what calamity the magic bullet had wrought. The arrow Sayaka had loosed was not aimed at the Nalakuvera. The silver arrow was in actuality a whistling arrow, a ritual arrow releasing a great sound to banish demons.

Sayaka had chanted in a ritual as she had used the magic bullet. The cry of the whistling arrow enveloped the entire battlefield in its spell, drawing a giant, invisible magic circle over a kilometer in radius.

Then, the enormous miasma that spewed forth poured over the ancient weapons, neutralizing their mechanical functions.

“Senpai!”

Yukina’s silver spear flashed out as she sprinted.

The miasma was so grand that even weapons of the gods could not resist it. The life of any normal human bathed in it was surely forfeit. It was unclear if even vampires could withstand it. But Yukina’s spear, able to slice apart any magical power, neutralized the miasma.

Kojou ran as well, chasing after her. They had one target: the Queen Nalakuvera.

But it had already learned the attacks of Kojou’s Beast Vassals. Then what should he do…?

“C’mon over…Regulus Aurum! Al-Nasl Minium!”

That instant, the sight of Vattler fusing his two Beast Vassals together rushed up from the back of Kojou’s mind.

As things stood, Kojou was incapable of such a skillful feat. But if it was a simple simultaneous attack…

The lightning lion and incandescent bicorn rose up, withstanding the miasma, and attacked the Queen Nalakuvera. It was not lightning. It was not a shock wave. It was an enormous, explosive pressure spawned by the simultaneous attacks from the left and right. That was Kojou’s goal.

Having not learned this attack, even that weapon of the gods could not endure

it. With nowhere to run, the super-high pressure smashed the huge ancient weapon's armor, loudly crushing its interior frame.

Thanks to the queen being rendered inoperative, the small Nalakuvera all around them became inert as well.

It was not a mortal blow. But until it finished repairing itself, they were nothing more than piles of junk.

"…Ha-ha-ha, war is so much fun, Sword Shaman!"

Kojou and Yukina heard the voice of Gardos from above them. The bestialized aged officer opened the Queen Nalakuvera's cockpit, emerging with his body covered in blood.

No doubt he meant to fight them even in the flesh. Gardos drew his knife with his left hand.

As the madness of battle held him in its grip, Yukina looked up at him and shook her head, as if pitying him.

"This is not a war. You are a mere common criminal. Someone like you without a country to protect has no right to speak about *war*!"

Yukina's murmur made Gardos's smile twitch. Kojou realized that a single sentence from a young, "helpless" girl had engraved decisive defeat upon the bottom of the aged officer's heart.

Roaring in rage, Gardos charged toward Yukina.

Yukina did not even poise her spear, making but the slightest movement of her body.

A soaring, wind-ripping arrow pierced Gardos's left shoulder, staggering him. Of course, Sayaka had fired the arrow. And furthermore:

"…It's over, old man!"

Kojou powerfully rammed his fist into Gardos's wide-open belly.

Kojou punched him again. And again. For having abducted Asagi and Nagisa. And one more for Yukina.

Finally, Gardos's tall frame gently fell to the ground, his strength seemingly

exhausted.

The Beast Vassals, too, had finally reached the limits of their robust constitutions.

“Break thyself, Nalakuvera.”

Yukina, climbing into the now-empty cockpit, played the audio file Asagi had provided.

Leaving sounds like frail, lamenting voices behind, all of the ancient weapons fell to the ground like rotted trees.

Unable to withstand the impacts of the falls, cracks ran all across the Nalakuvera armor. They resembled heavily eroded boulders, finally making a great sound as their giant bodies cracked open. It was the work of the program Asagi had made.

Sending their self-repair function into berserk, the Nalakuvera had dismantled themselves. Finally, all of the ancient weapons crumbled to dust, carried by the wind into the sea, vanishing.

The entire process had taken less than five minutes.

“…Got any problem with this, Vattler?”

Kojou languidly looked back as he asked his question. The young aristocrat of the Warlord’s Empire, who hadn’t even broken a sweat, had just come close, clapping his hands with a “bravo!”

“Ahh, not at all. You have quite satisfied me, Kojou. I shall not be bored for some time, I think.”

“Ah?”

Kojou’s bloodlust rose at his implication that when he did get bored again, he’d kick up a brand-new incident.

Vattler made no sign of noticing as he approached the fallen Gardos.

“Fine if I take the Black Death Emperor Front members into custody? They shall be punished according to the laws of the Warlord’s Empire. They sunk my ship after all; I would feel amiss if I did not do at least that much.”

“…Do as you like.”

Kojou acknowledged Vattler’s egotistical statement with an annoyed wave of his hand. If Kojou refused, Vattler would just demand the Japanese government extradite the criminals itself. If he wanted to deal with the fallout, it was best to leave it all in his hands.

Having lost all of the Nalakuvera, the Black Death Emperor Front no longer posed any threat. For Kojou and the others, their duty was done.

“Oh yes. Do not be concerned, they shall not be executed. I would find it so boring to kill a mighty foe trying to kill me; they’re quite precious.”

As Vattler dropped that disturbing statement just before leaving, Kojou felt his headache increasing that much more.

Apparently that man had learned absolutely nothing. He’d surely search for another enemy to come for his head and kick up a similar incident someday. All Kojou could do was pray he wouldn’t be caught up in it.

And there was one more reason Kojou’s spirit was weighed down…

“So you sucked on Sayaka’s blood, didn’t you, senpai?”

Yukina looked up at Kojou as she inquired, her eyes like a very deep lake.

Kojou’s breath caught. This was the situation he was most afraid of. In the first place, as Kojou’s watcher, Yukina had been granted the authority to eliminate Kojou according to her own judgment.

He’d sucked on her friend’s blood where Yukina couldn’t see. It would be natural if Yukina flew into a rage over it. He’d hoped if he said nothing that maybe it wouldn’t come out, but unsurprisingly, that hope was in vain.

“Ah, er… No, that’s ah, well…”

“An emergency situation. Yes, it was an emergency situation, Yukina.”

Side by side, Kojou and Sayaka desperately made excuses. Yukina was expressionless as she looked them over.

“Is that so?”

“That’s right. We were buried underground with debris plugging the exit with

water coming in on us.”

Yukina’s unexpectedly calm reaction unnerved Kojou and Sayaka even further.

“R-right. At that rate, I thought we were gonna drown underground. Feeling we should keep it secret from you was just…”

“Why are both of you so nervous?” Yukina asked them in a calm, composed tone of voice. Then, Yukina unexpectedly shifted her gaze toward Sayaka.

“Come to think of it, Sayaka, that’s senpai’s parka, isn’t it.”

Sayaka made a “hiuu” sound as her entire body froze.

“You’re wrong, Yukina. This man suddenly forced his parka on me against my will…”

“Now hold on,” Kojou said loudly in her direction.

“I didn’t have to work *that* hard to get it onto you! And didn’t you like getting the royal princess treatment?!”

“You idiot! Why are you saying something like that now?!”

With a sound of annoyance, Sayaka began smacking Kojou’s forehead. Yukina stared for a while as both engaged in what could only be thought of as a lover’s quarrel.

“I’m glad both of you are getting along so well. Though I’d be quite upset if you’d sucked on Sayaka’s blood against her will, senpai.”

Finally, she made a very deep sigh. Kojou awkwardly turned his head and looked at Yukina.

“Then…you’re not angry now…right?”

“No. Not at all. Not even a little.”

Yukina made a strained smile. Seeing it, Sayaka was so relieved that she limply slumped to the ground.

It was a show of weakness that made her earlier valiant fighting seem like a mirage. As Sayaka clung to her, saying “I’m so glad,” Yukina gently petted her head, going “There, there.”

When, seeing the two of them so intimate, Kojou breathed a sigh of relief, he suddenly met Yukina's eyes as she looked straight at him. Yukina had a pretty grin on her face as she spoke.

"…It's not as if I'm thinking whatsoever about how senpai called me cute when he sucked on *my* blood!"

Outro

OUTRO

It was a high-class hotel inside Keystone Gate, the central section of Itogami Island. Dimitrie Vattler was sitting easily in an elegant chair, watching the guests in the lobby come and go.

He sensed someone slowly walking behind him. It was a small person, no doubt. Making light steps that felt like they had no weight to them, the person sat in a chair with its back facing Vattler.

As a little time passed without anything occurring, the person finally asked Vattler with a murmur as if speaking to oneself. "…Have you concluded your inquiries?"

It was a young girl's voice. Though the tone of voice was respectful, it didn't sound formal.

It sounded as if she was smiling as she teased.

"Oh yes. Being a diplomat has its advantages."

Vattler did not look back, either, replying as if to no one in particular.

"It has been a while, 'Paper Noise'…or should I address you as foremost of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency?"

"You are free to use either."

She let out what seemed like a self-effacing exhale in response to his exaggerated formality.

Vattler made a sarcastic laugh as he bounced a question back at her.

"So what brings you today? Though if you have come to kill me, I welcome you to try?"

"Unfortunately, that must await another opportunity. Today, I simply came to bring the document you requested… And if I may ask just one thing?"

He sensed her taking out a thin envelope. “Hmm,” went the young aristocrat, urging her to continue.

After a momentary, silent pause, she asked her question. “Did *he* put this Black Death Emperor Front plot into motion?”

It was as if she was afraid of forming the name with her own lips.

Vattler sat back, closing his eyes, and chose his words very carefully.

“I caused this entire uproar for my own personal amusement. Let us leave it at that. It’s all right, there’s still a little time.”

“Is that so?”

A weight seemed to be lifted from her shoulders as her tone returned to its normal flourish. She was about to get up on that note when Vattler called out to her nonchalantly, “Incidentally, is it safe to say you won your wager?”

“My,” she murmured, her voice sounding like a child caught playing a prank.

“So you indeed noticed.”

“Oh yes,” Vattler went, making a sound of pride with his throat.

“She fell for him surprisingly quickly. When I heard she hated men, I wasn’t sure what might happen.”

“If you knew our objective, why cooperate?”

She inclined her head ever so slightly.

“If one desires a tasty meal, one must at least fatten the game appropriately. Such a rarified feast ought not be consumed before it’s properly grown.”

Vattler made a smile of apparent pleasure, his sharp fangs poking out from his lips.

“There is nothing wrong with our mutual interests coinciding this time around. One hopes it will go so well the next time as well.”

“Agreed.”

Readjusting the edge of her school uniform’s skirt as she rose, she walked off without even glancing his way.

Intertwining with the wave of people in the lobby, she immediately vanished from sight.

Having finished arranging lodging at the front desk, Sayaka Kirasaka returned to the lobby.

Along the way, she passed by a girl with an unfamiliar face. She was a high school girl, wearing glasses and carrying a book under her arm. What made her eyes fall casually upon the girl was the fact she wore the same high school uniform that Yukina did.

But paying no further particular attention, Sayaka headed toward the young aristocrat whose appearance stood out far more.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Duke Ardeal.”

“Ah, welcome back. How was it?”

Vattler was brushing his blond hair back, looking over a letter she hadn’t seen before as he asked.

“No problems whatsoever. The room is all set to go, apparently.”

Sayaka spoke in a dutiful, businesslike tone. She’d switched out of her soaking wet school uniform into a very adult-looking gray jacket-and-pants combo. Thanks to her height, she looked very much like a corporate executive. Vattler had asked Sayaka to make arrangements for them to stay at this hotel.

As the *Oceanus Grave* had been sunk in the turmoil of combat, they had urgently required a place to stay that night.

It was a very sudden request, but twisted as he was, Vattler was still a great noble of the Warlord’s Empire, so the hotel prepared a royal suite as urgently as it could manage. Though Vattler himself had been deeply intrigued at the notion of staying up all night at a 24-7 family restaurant–slash–manga café, she’d somehow managed to talk him down from that and drag him all the way here.

“Thank you. Pardon me, making you make hotel arrangements. I am, well, short on competent butlers at the moment.”

“…I’m your watcher, after all.”

Sayaka was beside herself as she remembered all over again Vattler’s

recklessness in hiring a butler who was a terrorist actively trying to kill him.

“Come to mention it, why don’t I arrange a plane ticket for the return trip, too?” Sayaka asked with the implicit desire that he get out of Japan as soon as possible. Now that his prized cruise ship had sunk, a plane would be the only thing Vattler could use to get back to his home nation.

Now that he’d completed his objective of apprehending the Black Death Emperor Front, he had no reason to remain on Itogami Island any longer.

However, Vattler said, in a completely indifferent tone…

“Ahh, no need for that.”

“Eh?”

“I’m not going back.”

Sayaka looked at Vattler dumbfounded, as if he was a child making a selfish statement.

Desperately suppressing her desire to scream, Sayaka forced her voice to come out calmly.

“What do you mean by…”

“A letter arrived just now, while you were gone. See?”

Vattler withdrew some kind of fancy letter from within the envelope.

It was an official document issued by the Japanese government officially consenting to the establishment of an embassy. In other words, the Japanese government had granted formal permission for the Warlord’s Empire to open an embassy within the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City.

The embassy would be headed by Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Duke of Ardeal, Dimitrie Vattler…

Now he would be able to continue to remain on Itogami Island as long as he pleased; on the same island as Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor.

“I’m sure you’ll be receiving a new notice of appointment in short order. Well, best regards, *now and hereafter*.”

Vattler made a grinning smile as he spoke the words. Sayaka simply put her

hands on her head and sighed.

†

That evening…

Asagi Aiba awoke in a room illuminated by the seemingly lingering red setting sun.

Her scrupulously maintained hair was all in a mess, with her refined good looks currently more youthful than dazzling. She was wearing her turquoise earrings. Kojou peered nervously at her face as her unfocused eyes looked up at the ceiling.

“You’re conscious, Asagi?”

“…Kojou?”

Asagi called out Kojou’s name in a somewhat broken voice. An expression of relief came over her face, with her usual leering grin finally returning to her lips.

“Does this mean you were watching my face while I was sleeping?”

“At least call it lookin’ after you, geez.”

Kojou’s lips twisted with a strained smile mixed in. He’d been worried she’d suffered psychological trauma from being kidnapped, but if she was flippantly shooting the breeze the moment she opened her eyes, she was probably all right.

“Where am I?”

Asagi partially sat up as she spoke.

“The school clinic. The middle school one, though.”

He thought better of adding that the high school clinic room was still closed off due to Astarte being shot.

“…The Nalakuvera?”

Asagi’s voice hardened in unease. Kojou vaguely shrugged his shoulders.

“All wrecked. Some vampire went wild and smashed ’em all. Natsuki said it was all thanks to the virus you whipped up.”

“I see. Natsuki saved us, didn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

This time Kojou made a firm nod. Technically, it was not a lie.

Unsurprisingly, Asagi flopped back on the bed in apparent relief.

“Nagisa and them?”

“They headed out to eat something. They hadn’t had anything to eat since breakfast. Might be best you get something in your belly, too. They’ll be taking your statement later.”

“*Uwaa*…what a bother…”

Asagi tossed and turned on top of the bed. Kojou made a strained smile at her characteristically rude manner of speech.

“I heard about most of it from Himeragi. Sounds like it was pretty rough.”

“Yeah. Had to use my head a little…but… Ah, right, Himeragi, huh…?”

She stopped moving while facedown, glancing sideways to look at Kojou.

“So what are you all beat-up like that for? You have blood on your uniform and you stink of sweat.”

“Uh?! Er, this is, I was all worked up when I heard you were kidnapped, er, so I fell into the sea?”

Even for Kojou, these were thin excuses, but a pitying look was what came over Asagi’s face.

“Hmm…there’s a mountain of things I wanna ask you and Himeragi later, but it’s fine. Don’t worry. I’ll forgive you, just for today.”

“Hard to rest easy the way you’re puttin’ it, but…”

Kojou’s annoyed murmur never left the inside of his mouth.

“Ah, that’s right. There is one thing I absolutely have to tell you, though.”

This said, Asagi strongly got up off the bed. Kojou sent a suspicious look back as she knelt on top of the bed in classical Japanese form. He was a bit tense, sensing that whatever Asagi was up to, no good would come from it.

“What is it?”

“Errr, before that, could you take a look at this earring? Doesn’t the gemstone look a bit loose?”

Asagi looked up at Kojou as she touched one of her earlobes. *Don’t make this too much trouble*, Kojou thought, drawing near her with his guard down.

“This side?”

The instant he peered at the side of Asagi’s face, she grabbed hold of Kojou’s face with both hands. Then…

“…?!”

Suddenly feeling something soft pressing on his lips, Kojou’s breath stopped.

All sound vanished from the world.

Though forceful, it was an awkward kiss. Both of their breaths melted together.

Kojou’s head went blank. He didn’t know how much time passed.

When he returned to his senses, Asagi was back in her formal kneeling position atop the bed.

Her eyes were faintly moist as she smiled.

“So that’s how it is.”

Asagi smiled as she spoke, as if concealing a blush. Though her tone was the same as it always was, Kojou could only nod in shock at how she’d conveyed what were, by her standards, very serious feelings.

“…R-right.”

The light of the setting sun made Asagi’s cheeks glow red. The breeze blowing in from the window made her forelocks flutter.

As she seemed to brush her hair from her cheek in annoyance, her slender neck became exposed.

And Asagi’s eyes widened as she gaped at Kojou.

“Wait a… K-Kojou?! Are you all right?! Kojou?!”

She cried out in fright at the force of the blood gushing from Kojou's nose.

That moment, the door of the clinic room opened with two girls wearing middle school uniforms emerging side by side. Realizing something was amiss from Asagi's alarmed voice, they peered in through the gap of the curtains at the corner of the bed.

"A-Asagi, you're awake?! I'm so glad you're all ri… Hey, Kojou. What's that?! A nosebleed?! Geez, that's a lot coming out! What were you two doing?!"

Nagisa Akatsuki was in a state of confusion as she yelled. Asagi seemed to blush a bit as she stuck her tongue out.

"Mm, what I wonder. Perhaps I should say…practice for the sports festival?"

"Ehh…?"

A suspicious look came over Nagisa's face as she looked between her older brother's face and his friend's.

Kojou, with a hand still pressed over his blood-covered mouth, graciously accepted the box of tissues offered to him from the side. He wiped his face and his dirty hand as the bleeding finally eased. As he touched a folded tissue to his nose…

“…I told you to reflect, did I not, senpai?”

Hearing Yukina’s voice, which seemed like an icy blade, this time he coughed violently.

Yukina’s big eyes were unexpectedly close, her upturned gaze glaring at Kojou.

Kojou, completely at a loss, desperately shook his head.

“Wait, you said to reflect, but this isn’t the same problem here…”

For some reason, Yukina’s voice was small, like that of a pouting child.

“You really are hopeless, senpai.”

Afterword

I felt like at least one girl had a whole lotta death flags set on her—she made it out alive, but are we really out of the woods…?

Anyway, I was able to crank out *Strike the Blood*, Volume 2.

Actually, the last volume had an extra printing on a scale completely beyond my past experiences. Thanks to that, I was able to get the next one out without incident. To all the readers who reached out to me, I am once again grateful from the bottom of my heart. Really, thank you.

In the last volume, events unfolded on a comparatively small stage centered on Kojou and Yukina, but this episode bumps the scale up quite a bit. Put in concrete terms, it wasn't a big-shot artist, but rather a terrorist who came from overseas, making the scale feel considerably larger. Meaning now that our imperfect main character bears the (rather infamous) title of the World's Mightiest Vampire, he won't be treated to only small-time incidents inside the city. In this way, I thought I'd convey, a little at a time, the breadth of the world and the distribution of forces, so to speak.

New characters took the stage as well, but the recurring cast gets a real workout, too.

In particular, yes, Astarte. I'd planned from the start for her to appear again, but to be honest, I doubt readers expected her to play this much of a role. But there's no Armed Apostle old man this time. To any fans of his, sorry… If there are any fans, that is.

To our assigned illustrator, Manyako, who provided us with such splendid illustrations this time around also, thank you very much. You're always responding to my request to make things "less nerdy, more like a someone with a life." I can't thank you enough for producing splendid pieces of work that

surpass my expectations time and time again.

I'd also like to take the opportunity to thank the many other people who have helped me.

The first printing of this volume was delayed by a month, and we only just barely managed to hit that schedule. To all the readers who have been inconvenienced, I'm very sorry.

And last but not least, indeed above all others, I offer my greatest thanks to all of you readers who bought this book. As I want to produce more interesting works in the future that match your high expectations, please stick with me for a while longer.

I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 2

GAKUTO MIKUMO

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